

KENKYO, KENJITSU O MOTTO NI IKITE ORIMASU

I Will Live with Humility and Dependability as My Motto

**- Volume 3 -
HIGH SCHOOL – FIRST YEAR**

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CHAPTER 74

The day has finally come.

Will the protagonist really be coming to my school?

My heart is pounding. The next three years are going to determine the path of my life.

Here we go!

The high school section entrance ceremony was held on a bright April day, sakura petals dancing in the breeze.

I turned about and scanned the auditorium, but I couldn't find anybody who matched the description.

Since about a hundred new External Students will be joining us, it makes sense that I couldn't spot her.

I suppose I'll just watch the ceremony.

The representative of the current Suiran students was Tomoe-senpai, the Student Council President of the high school section, and it was him who gave the speech too. He sure has matured in the time I haven't seen him. A totally different person to the middle schooler who snacked on sweets with a smile.

As I was thinking about how cool he is, next up was Kaburagi, representing the new students.

When he reached the podium, the audience grew noisy. He does have pretty stunning looks, so I can hardly blame them for being shocked. His black hair together with the tinge of coldness on his face made him look like a black panther. Leaving the Internals aside, it must have been pretty shocking for the Externals with no resistance yet.

Anyhow, eventually the ceremony ended and we headed to our classrooms as we looked at the sheet with our classes on them.

After I found my name, naturally it was her name that I looked for next.

Doesn't seem to be in my class at least.

As I continued looking through the list of first years... umm... Oh!

Takamichi Wakaba.

...Her name was really there.

Wakaba-chan. The protagonist of 『you are my dolce』, and the heroine who ended up with the Emperor after many twist and turns. And the important girl who will determine my future.

Where is she? I wanna see her. I wanna see what Wakaba-chan looks like.

But since everyone needs to quickly make their way, I don't have time to visit another classroom.

Can't be helped. I'll have plenty of other chances to see her. I'll give up for now.

I decided to just give up and headed for my classroom.

When I entered my new classroom, the students were divided firmly into two camps: the new Externals who were sitting nervously by themselves, and the comfortable Internals who were happily chatting in groups of existing friends.

"Ah-, Reika-sama!"

"Reika-sama, gokigen'you. It appears that we're in the same class this time!"

Starting with my own group, girls began to form a ring to welcome me.

"Gokigen'you, everybody. It overjoys me that we will be together this year. Please take care of me."

"Gokigen'you, Reika-sama. I'm feeling terribly relieved to be in the same class as you."

"Reika-sama, gokigen'you."

Everyone started greeting me with a smile. A few Externals glanced my way. Some of them seemed familiar somehow, so I suppose they must be members of upper society. There aren't that many scholarship places, so the rest of the Externals have to be from fairly high backgrounds or at least rich enough to pay tuition. The number of genuine commoners is surprisingly little. And Wakaba-chan is one of those few genuine commoners.

She must be getting hit by such a culture shock right now. This is just totally different from any school she's been to, after all. I was shocked too when I entered the primary school section. But boy is she going to be even more shocked once they introduce the students to the facilities.

When our new homeroom teacher entered the class, everybody took a seat and we began our introductions.

"I am Kisshouin Reika. I sincerely hope that we shall get along this year."

When it was my turn I gave what I thought was a fairly standard introduction, but for some reason a number of people started applauding me.

Wha-, stop that!

I know that you kids don't mean anything bad, but please stop that!

Look! Look at the Externals! They're all shocked! They're all shocked and thinking, 'Holy shit, this girl is bad news!'

I'm not bad news at all, okay~ I'm not scary at all, okay~ I'm not a threat at all, okay~ After that, Sensei picked out people for class representative. I had the faint feeling this was going to happen, but I ended up as the female class rep. Ehh~ I'd already planned on being a proper Pivoine and staying away from chores and everything too...

There were some other girls who seemed like they could do it, but Sensei just looked at me with these eyes that said, 'Hey, you wouldn't refuse, right? Hey, you'll do it, right?'

so in the end I accepted. Ueh~ Must be hard on you, Sensei.

The other class rep was a boy who entered Suiran in middle school.

Deciding the people for the various other roles as well as a tour of the school would be taking place during tomorrow's home room period, so with that, class ended and we were all excused.

In the end, I never got to see Wakaba-chan today.

In the manga she was a cheerful girl, but I wonder what the real Wakaba-chan is like.

At any rate, now that Wakaba-chan has entered school, I don't have any time left to lose.

When I got home, over and over, I told Otousama,

"Fraud is bad."

Otousama was playing dumb and said he had no idea what I was talking about, but I'm begging you here, just tell the truth.

I have no plans of getting in the way of Kaburagi and Wakaba-chan anymore, but if you're still committing fraud then there's a chance somebody else will report you, right?

Aaah, I'm not making any progress with Otousama. I have to talk to Oniisama instead!

The next morning, it was time for the various other responsibilities to be handed out. Speaking of which, last year Little Monk mentioned something like,

"Enjou-kun handed out the roles to the External Students who were less familiar with the school,"

didn't he. Should I copy him?

But it would be mean to suddenly force them into it, wouldn't it. Maybe it would be better to have them help out as half members or something just to get them to participate.

Anyway, I decided to take a stab at it.

"Those of you who have just entered, I encourage you as well to proactively volunteer."

Still, not many of them raised their hands. Hmm~ Guess it can't be helped.

In the end, most of the representatives were Internals, so I suppose I'll just have to slowly get them to participate from now on.

After that was a tour of the school. Sensei and the class reps led everybody else in a row.

Because there are more people in the high school cohorts, the facilities were larger than the ones in middle school, but most of it turned out to be the same. Because of that, the Internals, myself included, were all fairly relaxed. In contrast, every one of the External kids were shocked and bewildered. Well, that's how it is.

The next place on our tour was the cafeteria. Wow, it's larger than the middle school one too. I wonder if the menu has increased too.

Ah! Speaking of which, the cafeteria was where Wakaba-chan stirred up trouble by trying to sit in the reserved Pivoine seats, wasn't it. What do I do. Should I warn all the Externals here? But in that case, we'd have to explain what the Pivoine is first, and having me openly declare all the privileges that we Pivoine get is a bit... you know? Maybe I should just get somebody to tell them in secret later.

How did it go in middle school again? They just seemed to all know after a while.

After that, we continued touring here and there, and just as the tour was about to end, we finally arrived at the Student Council room.

"Oh! So it's your class, Kisshouin-san. Come in, come in."

When we entered, Tomoe-senpai and the rest of the members introduced themselves to us.

“Kisshouin-san, you’re class rep even though you’re a Pivoine? Geez, you should just go all the way and enter the Student Council already,”

said Tomoe-senpai with a cheerful smile.

“That would be impossible for me.”

“Yeah. I mean, you *are* still Pivoine, huh. Oh, you External kids, the Pivoine is a group that receives special treatment here at Suiran. For the details you can ask some of the Internals. Incidentally, that red flower badge that Kisshouin-san is wearing is proof of membership, so be careful about those who wear them.”

Tomoe-senpai, explanations are fine and all, but the way you said it sounded like you were warning them to be careful about *me*, you know!?

Isn’t your girlfriend a Pivoine too! I’m definitely going to tattle to Kasumi-sama. Look, aren’t all the External kids looking even more frightened of me now...

“If you have any problems at all, come talk to the Student Council. But well, I guess things should be fine since you have Kisshouin-san anyway. She’s great at looking after others. If there’s anything you don’t know, just ask her. She’s a really good girl.”

Kyau~un! Tomoe-senpaaai! I really do love you after allll!

After saying goodbye to the wonderful Tomoe-senpai and co., we were heading down the hallway as another class came from the opposite end.

—And for a moment, a familiar face passed by me.

Wakaba-chan!

The Wakaba-chan I spotted was just like the Wakaba-chan I knew.

As usual, her hair was a bit messy, and her eyes were filled to the brink with curiosity.

That girl was the real Wakaba-chan.

Uwahhh, this is kinda moving.

After that, I kept turning around to look at her, and the new class rep started looking at me with worry. Oops, look at me, making mistakes so soon after entering. I'm nobody suspicious, okay~

Yesterday I only saw her name, but seeing her in person today moved me a little.

Again, I decided to carefully explain to Otousama the meaning of the idiom, "Swift is Heaven's Judgement."

As expected, he probably *was* doing something shady because he escaped to the study and holed himself up in there. That why to be doubly sure, I stood in front of the door and said,

"The heavens are always watching, okay!"

when Oniisama came home and dragged me into the living room and got angry at me, saying,

"I've already checked the records for the last two years, and there's nothing like that, so just stop with the weird worries already."

Really, Oniisama? Can I trust you, Oniisama?

"Dad is getting depressed because his daughter keeps falsely suspecting him,"

he said, so I decided to reflect a little on wronging Otousama.

I understand. I'll believe in you and Otousama then. We're family after all.

But just to make sure, I'll just make sure to remind him once in a while that the
Heavens = Me.

Hey, it's just to make sure, okay?

CHAPTER 75

It's been a few days now since I entered high school but there haven't been any problems. I haven't heard about Wakaba-chan causing any trouble either.

I popped down to stealthily check out her classroom, but she seemed to have friends at least, so I think she's doing okay.

I judged that it was safe to leave her alone for the time being.

That's why I've decided to work on building up the friendship in my own class.

The new External Students haven't been acclimating too well. Even the Internals are a bit stiff around people they didn't talk to in middle school.

That's why I've decided to hold a social gathering! And social gatherings mean food!

"You want to have lunch together as a whole class?"

"Yes. I believe that we should attempt to deepen our bonds by having lunch together."

I immediately decided to see what my fellow class rep, Satomi Yukinari-kun, thought. I was thinking that it would be difficult to make do with just the breaks between classes, so it would be better to try having lunch together one time and having a nice chat together.

After all, if it's lunch then even if you can't find something to talk about you can just recommend foods to each other. It's easy and inoffensive, right? I wonder what Satomi-kun thinks.

"Hmmm~ I'm not against the idea itself, but would we really be able to secure enough seats together for the whole class?"

Good point. Usually people just sit wherever there's room, so it would be rather

difficult to prepare a group of 40 seats.

However! Satomi-kun has forgotten one very important thing!

“There will be no issue.”

-CHACHING!-

I flashed my red peony badge at him.

“Hm? Pivoine? Eh-! Don’t tell me you’re going to use the reserved Pivoine seats!?”

“That would be beyond even me. However, reserving a group of forty *normal* seats may not be.”

At first I considered sitting in the garden and eating packed lunches together, but once I considered the rain I thought it would be better to host it in the cafeteria.

“Wouldn’t our senpais be annoyed if a group of new students suddenly occupied a part of the cafeteria?”

-CHACHING!-

I flashed the badge again.

“You can simply say that it was all *my* plan. Perhaps I will also have a word with the Student Council President, just to be safe. It is only a one-time event so I am sure that they will be magnanimous about it.”

“Oooh! As expected of you, Kisshouin-san!”

Satomi-kun began to applaud.

Ho ho ho! If you have any complaints then bring it up with the Pivoine!

...Hm? Is it just me, or did that line sound like something the Rococo Queen would say?

After receiving Student Council President Tomoe-senpai's OK, my class was able to have the lunch without a hitch.

When I brought up Kasumi-sama's name, Tomoe-senpai accepted with a defeated smile.

It wasn't a threat, okay? It was just a request, okay?

I'd feel bad taking up any particularly good seats, so I decided to just use somewhere out of the way and out of sight. I'd hate having to sit right in the middle under everyone's stares anyway.

"Well then, ladies and gentlemen, shall we dine?"

There were kids eating cafeteria food, as well as kids eating their bentous. It's completely acceptable to eat home lunches in the cafeteria, but there were some kids who had been hesitant so far, so hopefully this is a good chance for them to start.

As the lunch progressed, even the initially silent and stiff members of my class began to talk happily to the people around them.

There was a nice mood going, with Internal Students teaching Externals various things about the school.

"And so, those seats way over there are reserved for Pivoine members so you absolutely mustn't sit there if you're a normal student," I heard one of the Internals saying.

Mn, but those seats have a sign that says they're reserved for Pivoine, so I think anybody would realise.

Incidentally, I rarely ever use them. Ever since I entered middle school, I've almost always had lunch with Serika-chan and co. and my experience with the Pivoine seats

are limited to when I get invited by other members. Back when I was in my first year of the middle school section, Kasumi-sama would sometimes invite me. Mostly to listen to her talk fondly about Tomoe-senpai.

To begin with, lunch is when most of the talking and gossip gets done in a group of girls. If you miss out on that, you'll have trouble keeping up and they'll leave you behind. That's why if you're in a girls' group, having lunch together is something that's pretty important.

Kaburagi and Enjou are always in the reserved seats though. It's probably so that their fangirls can't get to them. I guess even they'd want to have lunch peacefully.

By the time lunch was coming to an end, everybody had really loosened up around each other. As for me though, I was just sitting with my group as always, so I didn't get to make new friends...

Well, whatever. At least a few of the girls spoke to me. I'll just have to keep at it.

But is it just my imagination that most of the boys were avoiding eye-contact? I'm a class rep too, so if you have any questions feel free to ask me, okay~

Even though I'm being so welcoming, why are they all asking Satomi-kun instead.

After our lunch event, I think my classmates all got along a lot better. That's great, that's great.

"It looks like everyone is closer thanks to your idea, Kisshouin-san. As expected of you," praised Satomi-kun.

Speaking of which, unlike the other boys, Satomi-kun has always spoken to me quite normally, hasn't he.

"I was under the impression that boys were frightened of me, but you seem to be speaking just fine."

“Eh-, afraid of you!? Ahh... Ummm, I wonder about that. Isn’t it kinda more like, you know, like you’re a flower beyond reach?”

...I have serious doubts about that.

“But anyway, I’m friends with Akizawa so I occasionally heard about you from him.”

“You were friends with Akizawa-kun!?”

That’s the first I’ve heard of this. And Akizawa-kun, what on earth have you been spreading about me.

“He told me that you two went to the same cram school in primary, and you’ve been close ever since. And also, how right now you’re apparently good friends with his childhood friend. I think her name was uh, was it Fukioka-san?”

“You know about Sakura-chan?”

“Yeah. I met her when I went to Akizawa’s. She was quiet and gentle, like exactly what you’d expect from a Yurinomiya girl.”

You’re being fooled, Satomi-kun! She might look like a traditional beauty but inside she’s just a nagging youkai with the tongue of a venomous snake!

But wow, Sakura-chan is so good at faking it.

I should really learn from her example.

CHAPTER 76

I'll be meeting with Aoi-chan for the first time in a while. The last time was in spring break so I'm really happy.

Unfortunately Aoi-chan's been attending a different cram school ever since high school started, so we can't see each other on a regular basis anymore. It had been my emotional oasis too...

But we've been talking via text and phone so I think we'll stay friends forever. I won't let you escape, Aoi-chan!

The two of us went to a café known for its cakes. True to its reputation, the menu boasted quite a large selection.

The banana tart looks really nice.



But it's so hard to ignore the black tea chiffon cake.



Maybe it would be fine if I bought the swiss roll to take home.



After agonising over my choice for a while, in the end I went with a cake made from milk chocolate.



Aahh~ How can just a bit of cake send me to heaven like this.

“It seems that your complexion has improved a lot since spring break, Aoi-chan. I’m glad.”

“Mn, thank you.”

Aoi-chan had completely recovered from her haggard self, and the gaunt cheeks from

right before the exams were back to their fluffy selves.

“Have you acclimated to your high school?”

“The moment I entered there was a test. I thought I was free from studying for the moment but then they hit me with that.”

“My~”

As expected of a prep school.

“But I’m done with studying for now. I’ve been thinking about joining a club so I’ve been having a look around.”

A club, huhh... I was in the go-home club as a middle schooler. Maybe I should try joining one too. It might lead to some new meetings too!

“I was thinking that since I’m joining one anyway, it might as well be a sports club. Maybe ballet or badminton or something. I was in the basketball club in middle school, after all.”

A sports club? That’s nice, moving your body around. Most importantly, it’ll help you slim.

“Perhaps I should join one too. A sports club, that is.”

“*You*, Reika-chan? I think that’s a great idea! Let’s see, I think tennis would suit you!”

“I am open to all suggestions except tennis.”

Tennis is the only club I'm absolutely against joining. Even though I'd be a complete beginner, I can already super see people expecting me to be some expert.

It's one of *those* things, you know? Like when some boy is named Tsubasa and everyone just expects him to be great at soccer.

It's scary how easy it is to see myself being stuck with the name Madame.

"I think I may simply have a look around as well. I still have only a faint idea of what clubs my school offers. I did have a quick look at the list earlier, but..."

"Yeah. It's hard to really know what you want without seeing it first, right?"

Aoi-chan laughed happily as she took a bite of her black tea chiffon cake.

I knew that was going to be good. Maybe I should place just another order...

"Now that your exams are over, you seem to have having fun each day, Aoi-chan. I'm glad."

"Hmmm... It's not all smooth sailing, you know. It's not school this time, though, it's home."

"Home?"

"Yeah. My Oniichan suddenly awoke to his guitarist's soul, so now it's just dundundundundun every single day. It's driving me crazy, but he won't reflect."

"My, my..."

"Not only that, he's even starting singing along these days. It's just a nightmare. Dundudundundundun aah aaa aaah aah~ The whole neighbourhood is filled with his crappy guitar and weird cries now. You know, the other day somebody told my mum,

‘Your son is such a talented guitarist’. It was completely sarcastic!” she shouted, something incredibly rare for her gentle self.

“Incidentally, which of your two oniisamas is it?”

“...Muscles.”

Muscles and guitar? Is he the hot-blooded type that would sing at the base of a volcano or something?

“I’m just so sick of it already. It’s so embarrassing I can’t even walk outside.”

“You have it hard.”

“Mn,” nodded Aoi-chan, before letting out a big sigh.

But although I feel sorry for thinking this, Aoi-chan, I kinda wanna meet that brother of yours.

“Would it be possible for me to meet...”

“Never.”

I see.

“Sorry for bringing up a weird topic. Enough about Muscles. How has school been, Reika-chan?”

“Well, it appears that others think of me as difficult to approach. Especially the boys.”

“You’ve said something like that before as well, haven’t you? I think it was during your remedials?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. Things are undoubtedly better than *that* time, at least.”

I stayed a deserted island until the very end, after all.

“Could it be that I truly do have a bully’s face? You know, it seems that there are lots of kids who avert their eyes in fear.”

“Eh... But don’t you have some close friends too? And I mean, you said you had that male friend from cram school too.”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

Akizawa-kun, huh.

“What if you had that boy spread your good points amongst the others? You could ask your girl friends too. You might makes lots more friends that way.”

“Isn’t that just a massive farce? If it was ever found out that I orchestrated it all, I would die from the embarrassment. And to begin with, it would be much too embarrassing to ask anyone for that favour.”

“Well, that’s true...”

I don’t want to believe that I’m cornered enough to do that.

“Then it has to be a club after all! You’ll definitely make new friends!”

“I think so too. I should go look at the clubs the next chance I have!”

Yeah. I'll make lots of new friends once I join a club, and then maybe I'll even start up some romance with a dreamy senpai!

I wonder what club I should join.

When they heard I was joining a club, the Tennis Club immediately came to invite me. I told you guys, the Tennis Club is just out of the question.

And what the heck is the Tenni-Pong Club. Isn't that like tennis too? And it's way too niche. I never even knew you guys existed.

And the Tennis de Table Club? Please just call it Ping Pong. Have some confidence in your own club, damnit.

And if you lot want to make me hold a racket so badly then maybe I'll compromise with badminton. Aoi-chan was considering it too, after all. Lots of the friends from my old life did it too. Mn, that might be a good idea.

I went to the Badminton Club without much thought, and was sent trembling by the speed of the shuttle. Impossible. I'll die if that hits me. And it looks like the running is really intense too. For me, running is a bit... Sometimes when I run I swear I can taste blood. I don't think I'm quite suited for it.

At my friends' invitations I went to look at the various sports clubs, but the intensity of it all steadily disillusioned me.

“After all of that touring, I think that sports clubs may be a bit much for me. I am sorry for making you accompany me,” I apologised to my friends, but everyone had this expression like, ‘I thought so’. I'm sorry, guys.

While I was walking around, feeling a little depressed at my own weakness, by chance I came across Class Rep who invited me to the Literature Club. Class Rep, are you still writing poems there?

Anyway, poems aside, maybe the Literature Club would suit me. I might make some

kind friends. Maybe I'll have a look tomorrow. Yeah. I'll do that.

In the end, despite my optimism towards them, the members of the Cooking Club and Handicrafts Club were incredibly nervous when I came to have a look, so I decided against them.

I actually wanted to try making a plushie though...

The hurdle for joining a club are actually really high, aren't they...

CHAPTER 77

Today, at Kasumi-sama's invitation, I was having lunch at the Pivoine seats. I feel like I've been eating nothing but sweet foods recently, so today I went with a healthy spring greens and bacon pasta.

"I heard that you planned a lunch event for your class," she said with a teasing expression.

I'll bet this is about how I used her name on Tomoe-senpai.

"Yes, both the Student Council President and the cafeteria staff happily agreed, you see. Thanks to that, everybody was able to have a pleasant lunch together."

"My! Huhu," she laughed.

Suddenly, some others joined our conversation.

"Was there any need to go out of your way to ask the Student Council? Why, it almost seems as though the Student Council is ranked above us."

"Yeah. When everything's said and done, it's us Pivoine that's the highest here at Suiran."

Oh dear~ Things have become annoying.

The Pivoine Supremacists really hate the Student Council after all.

Kasumi-sama was hanging her head awkwardly. Considering their reactions, it would be impossible to come clean about her boyfriend.

Unlike middle school, the tensions between the Pivoine and Student Council are quite

pronounced here.

It's probably because the power of the Student Council is a lot greater in the high school section. Well, considering who our current StuCo President is though, I doubt it'll turn into an all-out confrontation, but still...

"Because I am still only a new student, I felt that perhaps it would be safer to notify the Student Council as well. However, if my conduct has caused anybody discomfort, I am truly very sorry..."

"Ah, no, it's not your fault, Reika-san. Sorry about that. Just don't worry about it."

Once I started acting feeble and pitiful, they backed down surprisingly quickly. Uhehe. That was the end of that, and lunch progressed peacefully again. Both Kaburagi and Enjou occasionally joined in on the conversation too. Apparently they weren't going to join a club. Although, it seemed that a lot of sports clubs invited them.

"Which club did you want to join, Reika-sama? I heard that you went to check them out."

"Yes, although I am still having trouble deciding..."

Although, the truth is that there are a few cultural clubs that I want to enter. But all of them are filled with quiet kids, so it would be like a sudden wolf in a pen of little rabbits. They definitely wouldn't welcome me.

"How about the Tea Ceremony Club or the Flower Arrangement Club?"

"I have teachers that I have been learning both under since young, so there is really no reason to join those clubs as well."

“I see. Is there anything else you wanted?”

“At first I was interested in the sports clubs, but...”

Suddenly, Kaburagi and Enjou glanced my way. What the heck. So what if I wanted to join a sports club.

It's true that I don't have a good history with mountain climbing but my P.E. results are at least average, okay! And didn't I do pretty well during the Athletics Carnival!

It's not that I'm bad at sports. I'm just lacking the willpower, okay.

“I've heard that the Suiran sports clubs lean towards the intense side. Wouldn't it be a little harsh for you, Reika-sama?”

“Yes. I realised that it was impossible for me after having a look.”

I heard Kaburagi and Enjou quietly stifling their laughter. Annoying.

“Huuuh~? These seats are free, guys~”

At that moment, Wakaba-chan suddenly came this way with a bentou.

No way! Why!?

I got careless because of how far into lunch break we were. Did her class get held back or something!?

The plate! Where's the plate that says they're Pivoine only!? It's gonee! Who was it!? Who was it that removed it!?

As Wakaba-chan came over with an innocent smile, the atmosphere around the Pivoine senpais grew severe. This is bad... It seemed like the Pivoine Supremecists would explode at any moment.

“U-Umm! These seats are reserved for our use only, so normal students cannot sit

here, you know?"

Before I knew it I had stood up and warned Wakaba-chan.

For a moment she stared blankly as our eyes met. Then she turned around and found her pale friends, and finally realised that she was in trouble.

"I'm sorry! I didn't realise. I sincerely apologise," she exclaimed as she bowed, low, before rushing back to her friends.

Safe!

"What was that meant to be. A new External? Let's find her name later and issue a formal warning. She's setting a bad example for the rest."

"That girl did not seem as though she belonged here. Could it be that she was a scholarship student?"

"That'd make things all the worse."

Gegeh-!

"Umm! There is really no need to go that far. I am sure she is simply still acclimating. Could you perhaps turn the other way just this once?"

"However..."

"Of course it would not do to simply leave things, so I will personally talk to her class representative to give her a warning, as well as properly teach her about the Pivoine. Please?"

“...Then just this one time, in deference to you, Reika-san.”

“...Yes. If Reika-san is willing to go that far, then...”

“My! Thank you very much!”

Scaryyy~ The Pivoine is so scaryyyy~

There’s no need to get so angry just because somebody wanted to sit in a chair, okay~? And Wakaba-chan, you’re way too careless. The friends with you all noticed, didn’t they? And friends of Wakaba-chan, you’re supposed to tell her. Don’t just go pale and stand there.

Also, all throughout this little drama, Kaburagi and Enjou continued eating like nothing...

But wow, what happened just now was that scene when Kisshouin Reika got angry and screamed “Know your place!” at Wakaba-chan, right?

In the manga, the whole cafeteria went silent, and made Wakaba-chan rather infamous right at the start of school. It marked the beginning of a lot of troubles.

Still, I managed to avoid it, right? Although I did sort of stand up and warn her without much thought. I mean, things would have gotten extremely troublesome had I stayed still.

Aahh, but what happened was almost like the manga... Uu, my stomach is kinda hurting again.

But I’ll make sure to finish this pasta. Vegetables are good for you, after all.

I spoke to her class representative about what happened at lunch, and asked them to discreetly teach the new students what to watch out for.

It'd be nice if there was a Pivoine manual or something, though. Perhaps I'll have a word with Tomoe-senpai about it...

CHAPTER 78

This year's excursion was to Kamakura.

A city! It's finally a city! Goodbye, mountain climbing! Or so I thought until I heard that, yep, we were going to be hiking. To think that even Kamakura had hiking...

But well, I guess I was already kinda prepared for that. The real issue was the lunch.

After spending the whole gruelling morning on hiking, next was returning to the reserved hotel banquet hall to have lunch together as a whole grade. I was told that we were going to have seafood. Seafood is great stuff.

The problem comes after. Apparently it's Suiran tradition to have the External Students of each class gather together to prepare some kind of skit for the lunch. Like a baptism of sorts for them.

But a skit! And in front of three-hundred odd people! It's a total punishment game.

When the Externals in my class heard about it, all of them went deathly pale. Not like I don't understand though.

After asking around a bit, apparently the previous years were pretty much all choirs and concerts, with the occasional dance or magic trick. A few oddballs apparently banded together to recite Japanese waka poetry or haikus, too.

That day, whenever we had spare time, the Externals would group together and plan for the lunch skit. Mn, for things like this you have to decide what to do first after all.

“Can’t we just sing something?”

“But whatever would we sing? And would it be possible to sing loudly enough for a large hall such as this?”

“But that makes it even harder to see a skit.”

Hmm~ Looks like they’re having trouble.

Satomi-kun and I called out to them.

“How goes it? Have you yet agreed upon anything?”

They all shook their heads at me with troubled expressions.

“Apparently most people just sing or perform on instruments,” I added.

“But it’d be difficult to bring instruments...”

“I believe it quite possible to have them loan you at least a piano or a guitar. And the hall is furnished with a screen so with a microphone small magic tricks or juggling should be possible.”

“Really!?”

Looks like they had more options now.

“By the way, what’s the most popular thing for us to do?”

“From what I hear, some students with particular confidence in their singing voices

decided to sing Nessun Dorma. Apparently they were met with quite an applause, and were called the Three Tenors of Suiran or somesuch. They were so popular in fact that the popularity of doing mini operas sky-rocketed in the following years, or so the story goes.”

“Opera...”

“The Three Tenors...? But if there were only three singers, what was everybody else doing?”

“Lighting and sound, it seems.”

“Having it focused around one person might not be a bad idea.”

“However, pushing the pressure onto a single classmate is not ideal, so generally things of more equal participation are expected. The exceptions are only when somebody is particularly talented at something.”

“Talent...”

They looked at each other. Unfortunately none of them seemed to be superstars of any sort. They all looked a little crestfallen.

“Dances are popular too but it kinda depends on how tired each class is after the hike,” advised Satomi-kun.

Yeah~ If it were me I’d be half dead after all the walking.

“But there’s been all kinds of dances too. Stuff from proper dances, to waltzing to piano music or something.”

“I’ve never waltzed before.”

“Me neither... Outside of folk dancing at school, I’ve never really...”

Folk dancing, huh. If somebody did like, an Oklahoma Mixer, I’d probably end up laughing.

Ah, maybe a Mayim Mayim would be more exciting?

It turned out to be a unanimous vote against folk dancing. After long deliberation, they decided on the safe option of choir singing.

They immediately went to practice after school but the kids from the other classes were thinking the same thing obviously, so it was quite a scramble for the piano. After all, whether for choir or concert performances, the piano is a key part, right?

The music rooms in the high school section weren’t enough so I went and negotiated with the school. In the end I got permission for them to use the middle school ones as well.

“You’re amazing. You got us permission to use the middle school rooms? Umm, I guess you used your power as a Pivoine, right?” asked a girl hesitantly.

Hmmm. I can’t really say. When I went and talked to the teacher I was just like,

“Say, since you made me take up the class rep position and all, just lending me a room or two is nothing, riight?”

so I’m pretty sure I wasn’t demanding anything. Mn. That sounds right. It was just a

request.

“I should think it was because the school cooperates with its students,” I smiled.

Please don’t look at me so suspiciously.

Anyway, I was pushing for them to sing gospel music but they were like “We don’t have enough people for that...” and refused. Hm, do you really need that many people? I mean, the Three Tenors of Suiran managed, so can’t you get loud enough if you try? I was so sure it’d be popular too.

In the end they chose something easy. Well, it’s a song I quite like anyway, so it’s all good I guess.

After entrusting the key to the music rooms to the External students, I headed for the Pivoine. Just to be safe, I’ll check up on the Externals once more before I go home later.

On the way, I bumped into Katsuragi Boy in the hallway.

“Ah! Why the hell are *you* in the middle school!”

I checked the hallway in all directions. Hmm~ Nobody seems to be here. Alright.

“OWWW!”

I sentenced the rude little junior to a facial noogie.

I didn’t hold back at all so I’m sure it hurt quite a bit. Since we were the same height though, he pulled me off rather easily.

“What the fuck are you doing, violent woman!?”

“Is that how you address a senior? My, such a dullard, you poor thing. I henceforth name you Birdboy. The bird-brained Birdboy.”

“Fuck you!”

“My, are you not satisfied? Then go learn some manners and I shall promote you back to a full human once more. Well then, gokigen’yoh, Birdboy-kun.”

I walked away with a HO HO HO! when I heard the idiot call out,

“A bitch like you will never be worthy of Enjou-san!”

So of course I headed right back.

“W-What are you doing?”

Since he had his guard high, I kicked him in the shin.

“OWWWWW!!”

Hurt, didn’t it. Even the legendary warrior monk Benkei would cry from a shin kick.

“*Truuly* such a cretinous bird. Worry not. I have no feelings towards Enjou-sama at all. I will not get in the way of your love for him. Society still has much progress to be made towards completely understanding homosexuality, but there is no harm in fantasising as you please. Do as you deign appropriate.”

“Wha-, I’m not-”

OHOHOHOHO, I can't hear youuu~

With that, I left my mentally challenged kouhai behind.

The Externals in each class continued to practice each day.

One time in the hallway, I caught sight of Wakaba-chan running around covered in some weird cloth, but, eh, don't tell me it's really some dress-up skit!?

CHAPTER 79

The day of the excursion was met with clear weather. I departed after a good meal. I've had a history of suffering on these excursions but this year I was a little different. I thought of a way to walk without tiring!

In the past I always took large strides in order to make more progress. But the trick in mountain climbing is to take small steps!

Why didn't anybody teach me this earlier! Just how much unnecessary suffering did I go through...

Besides that, I also brought out my old stepper machine to train. Say goodbye to the exhausted Reika!

Well, to cut to the chase I ended up in the lagging groups again, but maybe because it was an easier hike this year, I had more fun than expected. I want to believe that it was my stepper training and strategy at work.

If only things were this easy every year. Being the kind girl that I am, I told all my fellow slowpokes about my small steps tactic.

But you know, there have always been some kids that were worse than me, you know? It's just that they all throw in the towel early and ride away in a car. Last time they were sitting at the base of the mountain drinking tea or something. Isn't that kind of unfair?

I'd want to do that too! But being the coward that I am, I never could find the timing to quit, so I was stuck with climbing to the end. And since the exercise was oddly good for my circulation I wasn't hit by a wave of anaemia the one time it could have made itself useful.

Anyway, there were plenty of kids who retired early this time too, riding away gracefully in their car. Well, some of those were members of my group though. For example, my fellow Pivoine member Haginokouji Fuyuko-sama, whose face would probably look good with those round eyebrows that the ancient Heian nobility wore.



A style that was popular in the Heian era amongst nobility.

Fuyuko-sama is attached to my group because it's the biggest faction, but she's a bit different to everyone else. Maybe it's because of her face, but it kinda feels like she lives in another world...

Sakura-chan might be "Japanese style" but this girl is plain "ancient Japanese". She'd probably look more natural in a juunihitoe than western clothes.



The juunihitoe (十二単) is an extremely elegant and highly complex kimono that was only worn by court-ladies in Japan. Literally translated, it means "twelve-layer robe". The juunihitoe started to appear around the 10th century during the Heian Era. Today, the juunihitoe can only be seen in museums, movies, costume demonstrations, tourist attractions or at certain festivals.

"Look, Reika-sama. We can see the ocean."

"Truly. How beautiful."

Yes, I have enough energy to speak this year. It's wonderful. I wish I had this much energy every year.

Or rather, if we just didn't climb a mountain each time I wouldn't have this problem to begin with. We went to Kamakura this year, so we should have just stuck to money-washing,



Zeniarai Benten Shrine (銭洗弁天) is a popular shrine in western Kamakura, which people visit to wash their money (zeniarai means "coin washing"). It is said that money washed in the shrine's spring, will double.

warabimochi,



Warabimochi (蕨餅, warabi-mochi) is a jelly-like confection made from bracken starch and covered or dipped in kinako (sweet toasted soybean flour). It differs from true mochi made from glutinous rice.

or just eating soft custard pudding.



Kamakura 'nama(uncooked) pudding'

I hope I have somebody to go sightseeing with, this time.

When we arrived back at the hotel after the hike I went and changed clothes.

Aah, I can finally get out of this track jacket. They don't suit me. If possible I'd like to avoid being seen in them outside.

I fixed up my appearance before heading to the hotel for lunch when I found the classes arranged around tables by class. The main course was seafood. All the exercise really gets your appetite up~

Oh! This Kamakura vegetable soup is pretty good!

But when I looked around, the External students were ignoring the food in favour of huddling their heads together. I see. They still have their entertainment to do, so I suppose it's no time to be eating. They really have it tough.

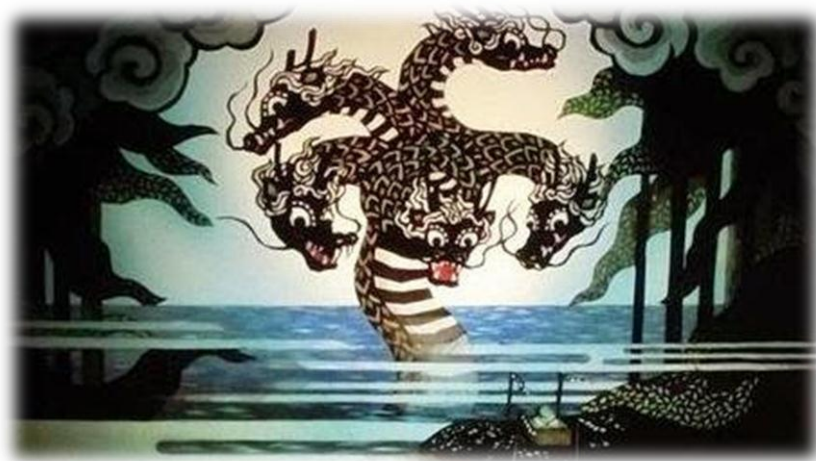
Around the time the food was finished, Class 1 began their skit.

Unsurprisingly it was a choir but they had a leader whose voice was trembling a bit. Can't blame them though. I'm just thanking my lucky stars that I'm not an External... After that there were concerts and skits too. My class was doing their best singing, with a piano and some people on the tambourines too. I don't think I'm biased in saying that their practice paid off.

In the class with the concert there was this one kid whipping his hair back and forth as he played the violin, but I have to wonder if he moved into the right school.

Finally, it was Wakaba-chan's turn.

In the spirit of being in Kamakura, her class performed the “Benten and the Five-Headed Dragon”. According to the story, in the past there was a terrifying five-headed dragon that lived in the Kamakura lake who caused natural disasters, demanded children as sacrifices, and just made life for the villagers hell. But then one day a heavenly nymph descended from the heavens who was so beautiful that the dragon proposed to her, but she rejected him and told him that she couldn't marry someone wicked, so he reformed and became a good dragon.



Benten is believed to have created Enoshima before subduing a five-headed dragon that had been terrorizing the area.

The guy playing the dragon was dressed in a mask and black cloth while the girl playing Benten seemed to be shrouded in white cloth. The other roles included the narrator, the villagers and stuff too. Wakaba-chan was holding a stick attached to blue cloth and was pretending to be the ocean.

“ZAZAAAN~ ZAZAAAN~” she yelled as she waved her stick, enthusiastically playing her part.

...Umm, Wakaba-chan, you're great, you're really shining up there. Trying your very best to wave the stick even when nobody is really watching you. Even though sometimes you got so tired that you had to do it with one arm, you gave your all to the

role until the end. Well done.

It couldn't be that she's being picked on, right? Or so I wondered for a moment, but there was a kid playing the part of Enoshima island so I guess I was just being paranoid. The part of the ocean is still better than being an island, right?

When my class' act was done, they came over to thank Satomi-kun and I.

"Thank you so much for all your help."

"Thank you very much, Reika-sama."

All I really did was get them that music room, but Satomi-kun practised with them and gave them the advice including the idea about borrowing the maracas and tambourines too. He really is great at taking care of people.

"You performed very well. It appears that your practised paid off," I said.

They all looked really happy. It looks like they became closer through all this. But it's not good to only stick to themselves, so hopefully they'll get close to the others too.

The class that won the prize for best sideshow this year was Wakaba-chan's class. The prize were enough tickets for free meals at the cafeteria for all of them. Wakaba-chan's eyes were shining. The food at our school is quite expensive so I suppose she didn't have much chance to try it. Good for her. I wish I could give her recommendations.

After that whole affair, I became closer to this External girl called Ikoma-san.

Friend GET?

But I'm a bit troubled because she looks at me with these eyes that seem oddly worshipping. I'll bet she has some weird image of me in her head.

Ikoma-san who always looks at me with these sparkling eyes filled with respect... I'm too cowardly to disappoint her, so I vowed to myself to keep up the act around her.

Ikoma-san, if you like my hairstyle so much, how about you curl your hair too?

CHAPTER 80

After the excursion comes the mid-term exams.

Because of all the smart External Students that flooded into my school, I need to study harder than ever.

Actually, I've been taking it easy these days so I haven't enrolled in a new cram school for high school yet. Right now I've only got a home tutor.

Before the exams began I decided to increase my lessons with her.

"Reika-san, you just always seem to struggle with maths, don't you. I think you can improve if you keep up the practice though, so keep trying."

"Yes."

But that's the hard part. I hate doing these questions...

If I don't though I might get called in for remedials again. I'll pass on those days of isolation again. And even though I'm really just some small fry I want everybody to keep saying "As expected of Reika-sama"!

For the sake of this petty pride I continued to battle with these baffling equations.

For the upcoming exams, this time I got my hands on some energy drinks. After all, I normally sleep 7 hours a night. If I get any less I start wobbling with sleepiness.

But when I was in the store seeing them priced at over 1,000 Yen each, they suddenly seemed like a bit much to drink casually. These felt more like something you'd buy for desperate cramming.

Thanks to that I decided to just buy a three-pack of the popular stuff to start off with. Hm, the taste was pretty nostalgic. I did drink it from time to time in my old life after all.

I'm not sure if it helped at all but I used them to study as hard as I could so I'm feeling pretty satisfied.

Although, when Okaasama saw my empty bottles in the bin she started worrying about me and said,

"You're a girl so you really needn't push yourself too far."

She gave me a lot of scarily expensive beauty drinks so I drank those too.

Well whatever. Come at me whenever, mid-terms!

So, about those mid-terms that I drank a bunch of energy drinks to study for... Well, it was still me doing the tests after all...

Anyway, Okaasama dragged me to beauty and hair salons after the exams ended. She really is fussy about how I look, isn't she. Totally fixated on making sure I look like her image of an 'ojousama'. Thank goodness said image wasn't dressed in goth loli or something.

Oh, and that random white hair seemed to be gone now. I never want to experience that tragedy again. That's why from now on I'm going to make sure to get full workovers more often at salons.

A few days after those treatments left my skin and hair sparkling, the results of the mid-terms were posted.

At Suiran, only the top 30 are posted. Since we have roughly 300 students it's absolutely impossible for me.

...But although I say 'absolutely', I still can't help but hope somewhere in my heart. Why is that?

Even though I'm wearing this modest expression that says I can't imagine being up there, I'm still going to check it out.

I looked up nervously, but yep, wasn't there.

Still, there sure were a lot of new names up there. They had to be all the Externals. As

expected of them.

And at the very top, shining brilliantly were two names:

1. Kaburagi Masaya
2. Enjou Shuusuke

Just how crazy are these guys. Their cumulative result was pretty much full-marks. Just what do they have there inside their heads. I'm so jealous. Since middle school they've always been unshaken in the top two places. Well, the two of them would swap positions though.

Also, although 1st and 2nd place were these two, 3rd place was Wakaba-chan! And her marks were super close to theirs as well. Isn't it completely possible for her to overtake them next time!?

The girl herself was staring dumbly up at the board with unruly hair as always. I just can't see her as smart... Wakaba-chan, your mouth is hanging open! You look ridiculous, so please close it already!

The students around me were murmuring about the identity of this mysterious 'Takamichi Wakaba' but I can't imagine anybody would connect that name with the spaced out girl in front of me. I guess she's like the perfect example of that saying about a capable eagle hiding its talons.

On another note, Stalking Horse managed to grab 5th place despite all these new Externals. That's amazing, Stalking Horse! As a fellow stalking horse, I'm proud of you! Anyway, when Wakaba-chan noticed her name up there, relief flooded her expression. I guess this is pretty much life or death for a scholarship student. Congratulations.

It was around that moment that Kaburagi and Enjou came along. They normally don't care at all about these but I guess they're here this time because of all the new students?

As they came sauntering down, the students all parted left and right for them.

After confirming their own names at the top, Kaburagi muttered,

“Who’s this Takamichi Wakaba?”

Some of the students heard him and pointed her out to him.

After taking one look at her, he simply left with Enjou. Although Kaburagi was expressionless as always, Enjou had a faint look of interest on his face.

The moment they left the crowd grew noisy. It felt a little dangerous, actually. One phrase I managed to catch was “...knowing her place” though...

Nobody was mad enough to publicly attack her, but it seemed like there were a lot of people quietly dissatisfied with her threatening the pair’s dominance on the rankings. The fact that she was poor and stuck out like a sore thumb certainly didn’t help.

But wow, even if they say that, Wakaba-chan is a scholarship student, you know? She *has* to get good marks. And if you’re worried about people threatening those two, why didn’t you complain when Stalking Horse took 3rd place all of middle school.

When I asked out of curiosity they told me, “Mizusaki-kun is different.”

What the heck. Is it his face? Is it because his face looks good?

Not only that, but according to the others, Stalking Horse had a charm that both the boys and girls were drawn in by. Well, I guess that’s not really surprising since he made it to StuCo President.

That doesn’t mean that you can blame your own shortcomings on some innocent External girl though.

“The External Students entered only after passing some very rigorous tests after all. That they have good grades is a given. Instead we should be marvelling at how Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama defeated them all despite that,” I commented.

“Truly! As expected of those two!”

It’s almost never a mistake to use the names of those two when dealing with girls. The

atmosphere was filled with their delighted squealing now.

When I got my report card handed to me, it listed my rank as 73. Hmmm... Should I be feeling happy about this rank?

Recently I've found a new method of stress relief. It's called needle felting. You've got this ball of wool and you poke at it with needles. It's actually weirdly fun. I've been following the instructions in the textbook, and my latest creation is a snowman. Well, it's basically just two white balls and two dots for eyes though. Also when I get too into it my eyes start to hurt so I have to pay attention to the time. MY EYES-! MY EYEEEEES-!

I usually do this in my room, but occasionally I camp out in the living room too. Today I'm making a Tarow the Taro. I'm using brown felt this time.

-poke poke poke...-

When Oniichan saw me after a late night at work he asked me,

"Who's the target!?"

It's not a voodoo doll...

Geez. I wish I had some friends in the arts and crafts to understand my feelings. I wanna join the Handicrafts Club...

Should I pretend to be socially oblivious and just force my way in?

But if I do that I'll just end up isolated in the room again. Uuu, these tears are just because I'm straining my eyes, okay?

CHAPTER 81

After entering high school the Emperor became even more popular. I could see in their eyes that the onesamas in the 2nd and 3rd years seemed especially serious about catching him.

So far they'd always seen him as a middle school kid, but then now he was a high schooler just like them. Not only that but his appearance was mature so he didn't look younger than them, and most importantly he was the heir to the Kaburagi group. You *would* be pretty serious considering all that.

Outside of close friends though, Kaburagi himself has been silent as usual. Thanks to that nobody noticed his faults. Silence truly is golden.

Hm. Is it my imagination that a lot of girls are wearing Yurie-sama's haircut?

Anyway, about Emperor. One day dear Emperor was seated in the salon, partaking in a crème chiboust.



I always start gaining weight the moment I eat anything sweet so why is it that boys never gain weight despite gobbling everything down. So jealous.

Thinking about it, rumour has it that the Emperor goes horseback riding as a hobby. Maybe it really *is* all the exercise. He turned down the Horse-riding Club, but I bet he would have joined had it been a polo club, right? After all, he's the Emperor of Cavalry Battles. Upfftpftt.

Maybe I should try swimming or something. But for some reason I have trouble staying underwater. Even though I'll try my bestttt to dive downwards, I immediately start floating upwards. What the heck is that. Would it help if I went and took lessons?

While I was thinking about stupid things, a 3rd year boy came up to me.

"Reika-san, is anything bothering you? You seemed to be deeply considering something."

Deeply considering? Uh, I thinking about how I wanted a crème chiboust too, and that I should hurry home so I can needle felt...

"No, nothing of import. I was simply pondering the theme for my next flower arrangement."

"Ahh, that's your hobby isn't it. Should I find the chance I'd definitely want to have a look."

"Goodness, my creations are certainly not good enough to be shown."

Hmmmm. All these guys have been randomly approaching me since I've entered high school. And I keep getting party invitations too. I've been trying to turn those down though.

I mean, I'm interested in romance but guys who come after me all calculating and stuff are a bit...

After that I continued discussing flower arrangement with the few other people who came along.

Today was the first time Sakura-chan had come to my house.

She's an ojousama from Yurinomiya Girls School, so Okaasama quite liked her. After seeing Oniisama off to work, I lead Sakura-chan to my room.

"Wow, as expected of the Kisshouin family. Even in Yurinomiya there aren't many girls with such big houses. And I met the heir too. Maybe I should brag to my seniors or something."

The very moment she stepped through the door she stopped bothering with the pretenses.

I put down some chilled tea on the table, as well as the luxury fruit jelly that Sakura-chan brought as a gift.

"About Oniisama?"

"Is there any other heir? Amongst older girls he's like the prime pick right now, you know?"

"Hmmm. Is that so."

Gosh, I'd hate that. What if Oniisama married a gold digger. I want him to be happy. Ah, but well, I doubt Oniisama would get caught by such a person anyway.

"Wow, this Kiwi jelly's pretty good."

"You really do like sweet things, don't you Reika."

"Uu. I've actually been wondering about my weight again recently... Am I still in the clear?"

"Have you been continuing yoga?"

“Mmm, just the Mountain Pose and the Corpse Pose though.”

“That’s basically just standing and lying.”

But it’s ’cause it gets so boring doing it by yourself in your room. Guess it isn’t really interesting outside of a classroom.

“Do you do anything active, Sakura-chan?”

“I’ve been doing Nichibu dancing ever since primary school.”

Ooh! A perfect fit for the Japanese-style bishoujo!

“I’ve been thinking about picking up swimming lessons.”

“...I can already see you skipping the moment winter comes along.”

Oh my gosh! I can see it too!

“Ummmmmm, have you entered any clubs?”

“The Wind Instruments Club. I wanted to try the cello, and yeah.”

“Huhh. The Wind Instruments Club.”

“And you, Reika?”

“I wanted to enter the Handicrafts Club, but...”

“Handicrafts... It doesn't really suit you, does it.”

“You think so too? All the club members seem scared of me for some reason so I've been worried that joining would bother them...”

“Well, at a glance you seem like the perfect ojousama and all. And you've got authority too. ...Oh, what if you brought them some homemade sweets? It'd totally destroy your image and then they'd feel closer to you.”

Handmade sweets? I can see that happening.

“Thanks, Sakura-chan! I'll try making some now!”

“Eh- ...Serious?”

Now what should I make.

When Oniisama got home and I asked him what sweets I should make for school he told me not to give my handmade stuff to new people.

“To begin with, why this all of a sudden?”

“I want to enter the Handicrafts Club but I don't feel very welcome so...”

“Handicrafts, huh. Speaking of which you've been making something or other with the stabby needle, haven't you. That's what you want to do in your club?”

“Mmm, well, at the club they've been knitting dolls. I've tried learning through books at home but it hasn't been going well. And then at some point I got distracted by needle felting and...”

“Why not just be honest and tell them that you’d like it if they taught you to knit?”

“But would they...?”

“It’ll be fine.”

Oniisama patted me on the head. Wow, this brings me back. How come when Oniisama says it’ll be fine I really start to feel that way. What a mystery.

Alright! I’ll try just that then!

The next time the Handicrafts Club had their activities I visited by myself to avoid needlessly scaring them.

Although their faces seemed to be saying, ‘*She’s here **again!**!*’

“Umm, to be frank there is something I would you to teach me. Would that be acceptable?”

“What is it?” asked the club president.

I took out my ball of yarn and the book on knitting dolls.

“The truth is I have been trying to knit. It has not been going terribly well, however. I thought that perhaps I could enter the Handicrafts Club and have somebody instruct me, but...”

“Knitting? You, Kisshouin-san?”

The club president seemed awfully surprised.

“What are you trying to knit?”

“This.”

I pointed it out in the book.

“Aah, there’s actually a simple trick to this. ...I could teach you if you’re okay with me.”

“Truly!?”

Yay! I should have just asked to begin with!

With Club President’s help, I immediately started knitting away at the brown wool. Since I was a beginner, and the doll was going to be rather big, it seemed like it would take quite a few trips.

Over the days I visited, the other club members opened up and started giving me all sorts of advice.

Lately they don’t even look scared when I come anymore. I’m super happy.

We talk about silly things too, and it’s just a relaxing time in general.

But to this day, they still haven’t given me a club entry form...

CHAPTER 82

Hmm hmm hmhhh~

My doll knitting has really coming along. I've been using the expensive stuff so it always feels good to touch it! I think I'll have a lot of fun rubbing my cheeks against it when I'm done.

I've been knitting at home as well. After dinner I usually laze about in the living room and work on it. I wonder if it'll be done soon.

I'm also happy that immersing myself in this has been reducing my snack breaks. Why do humans always go looking for food when they're bored...

Anyway, maybe I'll go back to needle felting once this is done. I think I'll try making a cat this time.

Hmm hmm hmm~

As usual, today I headed to the Handicrafts Clubroom with my knit doll.

"It seems to be progressing quite nicely, Reika-sama. It should be done soon."

"Yup, it's looking quite cute. I like how you've done the belly."

"Thank you. I have been knitting at home as well."

I was particularly careful about how I introduced a different colour for the seams. The curvature of the belly was done super, super carefully too.

"I was thinking of using needle felting to create a cat after this is complete. If I am not mistaken there are a few members of this club that practice needle felting as well,

correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I beamed at the Felting Group.

They smiled back at me. Yup, I really think we’re getting along.

So Club President, please let me into the club already. I know you’ve got the register in a clear folder in that schoolbag over there, okay?

Don’t think you can get rid of me after this knit doll is done.

One day while I was heading the Handicrafts Club, as I passed Enjou in the hallway he said to me,

“Kisshouin-san, Katsuragi has been calling you the Violent Woman. Do you have any idea what he means?”

so I replied,

“Not the faintest. I have not the slightest inkling of what on earth he means.”

He smiled at me and drawled

“Of course. You’re ever so graceful after all.”

so I smiled back and replied,

“Of course.”

before making my way to the clubroom.

That little snitch. He brings shame on the entire male sex... It's settled. My next needle felting project will be a birdbrain.

Eventually my doll was finally complete. I brought it with me to the living room where my parents and Oniisama were relaxing with some tea.

"Oh? Reika. Is your doll done?"

"Yes, it is."

"You've been knitting quite a bit, haven't you. Did you make a doll?"

Tadah!

I revealed my doll to the family. It was a small tanuki with glasses.

"This is you, Otousama."

"Eh-"

I handed it over to him.

"I made the animal that I think suits you best, Otousama. I made it just for you. Will you accept it?"

"For me?"

Holding it in two hands, he stared at it.

Back when Wakaba-chan first entered Suiran I was so shocked that I might have repeatedly and vocally doubted Otousama. He got completely depressed and Oniisama

told me off. I'm reflecting.

Everyone knows it, myself included, but I'm kind of a brother's girl. Still, Otousama has always spoiled me since I was little. That's why I like Otousama as well. Plus, seeing a man his age look so sad made me feel pretty guilty too.

That's why I made this as an apology.

I know that people hate getting hand-knitted stuff because it's too intense, but we're father and daughter so it's totally okay, right?

"I even added glasses, see? Don't you think it looks just like you, Otousama?"

I took a seat next to him.

"Yeah, it's well made. Thanks, Reika. I'm really happy. But you see me as a tanuki, huh. Is it because you think I'm cunning like an old tanuki...?"

"No, the tanuki has a fat belly just like you do. But hmm, an old tanuki. I suppose that fits you as well."

"...I-, I see."

Otousama made a somewhat difficult expression as he kept looking at the doll.

"It was my first time knitting so the seams are a little off, but you can barely see it if you avoid looking closely, right? This is my first completed knit doll."

"Ooh! So the first one goes to me."

Otousama looked at Oniisama smugly.

Otousama, you really look like an evil tanuki when you do that, you know.

“Good for you, Dear,” added my mother.”

“Yup, yup. But Reika, do you really think my tummy is that big?” he asked as he rubbed his belly.

“Yes, it is. Being overweight is bad for your health, so I think you should take a diet.”

“...I suppose.”

“I know a way to get rid of a stubborn tummy; hula hooping. I shall lend you mine, Otousama.”

“You have something like that?”

“...She’s at it again...?”

Eh, Oniisama, did you say something just now?

“Let us hula hoop together. After all, I hope that my beloved father will stay healthy forever.”

“Ohh! So that’s how it is!”

The moment he heard “beloved” his mood shot through the roof.

Is Otousama going to be okay? I’m worried he’ll get scammed one day. You really shouldn’t trust everything people say.

With the doll in hand, Otousama headed to my room.

“It’s a bit embarrassing entering my daughter’s room,” he said, oddly happy.

Oh gosh. Could it be that it wasn't fraud that gets him in trouble, but sexual harassment?"

"Now then, Otousama, really put your back into it and work off your tummy!"

"Alright!"

Otousama began vigorously hula hooping.

"GYAH!"

"Otousama!?"

Otousama was admitted to hospital for back pains.

Okaasama got incredibly angry at me.

In the hospital room I just happened to say,

"Sorry. I should have known better than to push the elderly."

Oniisama said "He's at a delicate age, so pick your words better!" and got angry at me too.

I'm reflecting...

Anyway, after Otousama left the hospital my handmade doll found a place in the study. I heard that sometimes Otousama would happily pat it.

Since he liked it so much, I decided to be a bit cheeky and give it a cane for its back when Oniisama yelled,

“Have you reflected at all!”

and got angry at me yet again.

Of course I have. I’m teasing him because I love him.

CHAPTER 83

One day in June, Kasumi-sama passed words to me that Tomoe-senpai was calling me to the Student Council room. Apparently it was some secret...

I opened the door in trepidation to find Tomoe-senpai and Stalking Horse there.

“Sorry for calling you out here, Kisshouin-san. Come sit down.”

Tomoe-senpai beckoned me towards one of the couches. Right next to Stalking Horse. Who glanced at me for a moment before averting his eyes.

After sitting down on the sofa opposite ours, Tomoe-senpai looked at my face, and then Stalking Horse’s.

“I actually called the two of you here because I wanted the two of you to serve in the Student Council next term.”

“Hah?”

“Eh?”

Serve in the Student Council!?

In middle school the member of the Student Council served until the end of Term 2, but in high school it’s only until Term 1. Right after the Summer Break the Student Council President retires and an election is held. Once the new Student Council President and Vice President are elected they nominate the other members. The students they nominate are told in advance though.

And apparently I was one of them.

“Arima, I know you were the Student Council President in the middle school section. You’re an obvious choice. You’ll accept, of course?”

“Yeah, well, I don’t really have a problem with it but...”

Stalking Horse looked confused as he glanced my way. Mn. I know what you mean.

Why the hell is a Pivoine girl like me here, right? I'm basically asking the same thing.

"True, Kisshouin-san is a member of the Pivoine, but since primary school she's served as Class Rep a number of times. Not only that but she's honest and hard-working. This is something I know very well too. Not only that, but she's one of the Pivoine members who get along more amicably with the Student Council. It's really a new faction, you could say. That's why I really hope that she'll accept."

Uwaaa~ I'm happy that Tomoe-senpai trusts me so much, but defying the Pivoine like that is really too scary. I'd completely ruin myself if I did.

"I am terribly sorry, Tomoe-senpai. That is probably asking a little much. I *am* still a Pivoine member in the end."

"You can't be both?"

"I would probably be seen as a spy by both sides..."

Scary. I'm actually in the Pivoine so I know better than anyone else just how scary it would be to anger them. At worst I might be bullied until I drop out of school. Ah, but well, it's the Student Council's job to help with bullying isn't it.

Anyway, the elitist Pivoine and egalitarian Student Council are like, conceptually opposed, so there's no way I could be a member of both. It wouldn't make sense.

"Mmn, I guess you can't after all."

Tomoe-senpai stretched.

"You know, I thought you might say that but since it was you I was just hoping that you might. You'd be like a bridge between us after all. But I guess the divide between the two groups is even more intense during high school, isn't it?"

Yes. It's not just a divide, it's like the Mariana Trench.

"Then just you for Student Council then, Arima. But Kisshouin-san, you'll help out in your role as Class Rep?"

"Yes. Whatever I can."

Next to me, Stalking Horse was looking at me suspiciously. What the heck. Didn't we get along in middle school? I was Class Rep then too. Aah, but then again I was the one who collected the handouts while it was Monk Boy who actually brought them to the Student Council Room.

Don't tell me that he thought I pushed all the work onto Monk-kun!? That's offensive! I worked my butt off!

And I thought we were stalking horse buddies too.

Why are you looking at me like that! You're supposed to be the Vice Chief of the Forever Alone Village!

"What."

"Nah, nothing."

Tomoe-senpai smiled helplessly at the two of us.

"Arima. Kisshouin-san is somebody you can rely on in a crisis. Don't be prejudiced just because she's a Pivoine. You need to have an open mind."

"...But then what's with that nickname of hers."

Nickname!?

I heard his mumble with my super hearing.

"Mizusaki-kun. What nickname might you be referring to?"

"Uh... It's nothing."

How can it be nothing! Are people calling me by some weird nickname behind my back!?

Could it be that's why the boys all avoid me!?

"Mizusaki-kun."

"I don't know anything!"

“You lie. When a person lies they look up and to the right. Just as you did a moment ago.”

“Why do you know stuff like that!”

Oniisama taught me. Problem?”

“Anyway, I said I don’t know, okay! It’s Makkie or something, okay!”

Makkie? Makkie because I’ve got makigami(curled hair)!?

I’m not sure if I should feel offended or not. I mean, at least it’s not Curls. Isn’t it a bit cute? Makkie. Boys, you can call me Makkie if you want!

Stalking Horse was covering his eyes with his hands. Is he that afraid of me seeing through his lies? Bro, the moment you do that I can tell you’re lying. Is there some other weird nickname?

“Now, now, you two,” said Tomoe-senpai as he came between us. “You’re the two kouhai I trust the most. That’s why once I graduate and leave, I hope that you’ll support the Student Council together.”

Since he stopped us I’ll leave it for now. I can always investigate later.

More importantly... Graduating, huh... Even though I’m finally in the same section as him again, he’ll be gone after just a year? That’s so lonely.

“Oh? Is something wrong, Kisshouin-san?”

“No...”

Wow. That’s really so lonely.

Tomoe-senpai is really balanced so things aren’t too bad between the Student Council and Pivoine right now, too.

Actually, it’s really only him that doesn’t mind the Pivoine. The next Student Council President wouldn’t want me in it anyway.

I wonder what’s going to happen after he leaves. I don’t want things to get tense.

“Anyway, that’s all I had to say. Arima, we’ll hammer out some of the details for next term, so please stay behind for a bit. Kisshouin-san, that’s all I had to say. Thanks for coming.”

“I understand. Then Tomoe-senpai, Mizusaki-kun, gokigen’you.”

“Take care, and stay safe.”

“...You too.”

After that I headed straight for the car waiting for me.

I’m feeling a bit down for some reason. I know! Tomorrow I’ll eat some snacks! It’s been a while! Maybe the Lucky Turn crackers I’ve hidden in my closet.

The next day I caught hold of Satomi-kun and questioned him about my nicknames.

“Your nicknames?”

“Yes. Yesterday Mizusaki-kun mentioned something to that effect. I heard about Makkie, but are there any other nicknames I should know about?”

“Makkie? Oh, because of your hair. Ahh, I dunno, not right now?”

“Right now? Then in the past I have had other nicknames? What were they?”

“Eh... Ahhh, Goddess... I guess...?”

“Goddess?”

“Ahh! I really don’t know much about it! But nobody uses it now, okay! It was just in middle school! I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again, promise!”

Goddess...? The first that comes to mind is Aphrodite, but that’s already taken. That boy who got rather enthusiastic with his violin performance on our trip. His hair is a bit of an afro so everyone calls him Afrodite. Except that’s a bit of a mouthful, so really it’s just ‘Dite’ now.

As for other goddesses, there’s like Venus or like Athena and stuff? Those are the famous ones after all. But there are so many Greek goddesses, aren’t there. Well

whatever.

“I suppose that will do, for now.”

Satomi-kun let out a huge sigh of relief and ran back to his ring of friends.

...Goddess, huh. But gosh, what if it's really Venus. Oh no!

CHAPTER 84

Cream cheese is delicious with honey.

It's great just to eat it like that but I like to eat it on scones. It's even more delicious that way.

My family buys high class honey from specialist honey stores without an issue. What a wonderful life.

I wonder which honey I should have today. Maybe the lavender.

I spread it generously on top of my cream cheese and then gobbled it all down with a scone. Wow. This is true bliss.

I'm feeling full with just one. But I'll have another just to be safe.

Eating it two days in a row has brought about some terrifying consequences though. Weight-wise.

Truly the food of the devil!

Anyway, while I was wallowing in my lack of self-control I received a phone call from Aoi-chan.

"Oniichan is getting weirder and weirder," she said.

"Ah, the muscley guitarist? Is he still playing every day?"

"He's singing too now..."

"My my..."

Her voice was grim.

"You know, apparently he started this whole guitar thing after he met somebody he

liked. And so he's going to confess to her with a self-written love song... Every day he submits his own flesh and blood to his horrible love songs. It's terrible, right? All of my family has been telling him to stop but he doesn't listen. And oh god, the lyrics.

♪ Ever since meeting you ♪

♪ There's been a thump thump in my chest ♪

♪ And my heart is light and tender ♪

Who writes crap like that. Some days I feel like I could die from the embarrassment. Whenever Oniichan starts to sing my mum will cover her ears. It's miserable being his sister."

A self-made love song? At least it isn't a poem, I guess.

Sometimes you see people singing and confessing to girls on t.v. but the girls always seem happy enough though. I'd probably run away in embarrassment, personally.

But then it's usually guys who write love songs and poems, isn't it. I don't think a guy would really want to listen to a love song. Maybe that's why girls make things instead? Maybe there's some male-only disease going around that makes them want to spontaneously write stuff like that. Scary... Thank goodness Oniisama never caught it. Oh, but sometimes Oniisama does play Schubert's Ständchen (Serenade).

It's wonderful!

Mn. I guess it's better to leave song-writing up to the professionals.

"Were somebody to suddenly sing and confess to me I might run from the shock. And what if the girl in question dislikes that sort of thing..."

"Yeah. But apparently the girl he likes is really into music. She likes musicians and that."

"Oh~"

“They takes classes at uni together and he tried his best to get her but it’s been hard. Apparently that was when he turned to song writing...”

“My~”

Classes at uni together, huh. I forgot he was in university.

“Mari~ Mari~ My beloved Mari~ You have taken me pri-soh-nah~ Good god, I can’t take the idiocy anymore.”

I guess he really doesn’t have any talent. Wow, this might actually be worse than Class Rep’s poem. If Class Rep’s disease gets any worse, do you think he might start breaking into song? Anything but that, Class Rep.

Hm, but Mari...

“Incidentally, might I ask which university he attends?”

Aoi-chan answered with Marin-sensei’s university. Huh, they’re the same grade too. Wait, no way...

“My tutor is apparently one of your brother’s cohorts. Her type is visual kei musicians too.”

“EHH!?”

“Her name sounds a little close too. I cannot give out her personal information, though.”

“I see. Then it might be the same person, huh. Visual kei, though? Oniichan’s stuff is more like folk songs though. That’s totally different.”

“Well, it may just be a coincidence after all.”

“Yeah. Maybe I should talk to Oniichan though.”

With that, Aoi-chan hung up. No matter what she says, she’s actually pretty worried about her brother’s love-life isn’t she.

Still, Aoi-chan’s oniisan and Marin-sensei? What a small world.

The next day I arrived at the salon to find Kaburagi playing Liszt’s Liebesträume (Love Dream).

EHHHH!? WHAT THE HEEECK!? SO COOL!!

The light from between tree leaves was filtering into through the window, and combined with Kaburagi’s amazing and emotional piano, I am ashamed to admit that my heart fluttered for a moment. No, Reika! Open your eyes!

But wow, who knew this stupid horse riding maniac could actually play the piano. I guess this is what they call ‘gap moe’? Goddamn, what power.

Man, but I’ll bet you anything he’s thinking about Yurie-sama as he’s playing. It’s a bit sad...

Oniisama’s Serenade is great too, but Kaburagi’s Liszt was also nice. Exactly what a young maiden would love.

Pretty much all the other girls in the room were completely entranced. A true privilege of being a Pivoine member.

I wonder if he’d take requests?

After hearing Kaburagi’s piano, I was certain. Writing your own song is a bad idea.

I messaged Aoi-chan:

“The wise stick to existing songs. Writing your own is high-risk high-return.”

The reply I got though...

“Oniichan can’t stop his fiery passion. After I told him what you mentioned, he became convinced that it was the same person. Apparently the girl he likes is the tutor to some incredibly rich ojou-sama. He’s changed over from folk songs to visual kei stuff and now he’s even added weird shouts to his song. Oh god.”

...Muscles Oniisaaaaan!

For Aoi-chan’s sake, I decided to help as well. I was going to sell her Oniichan to Marin-sensei. Once the two of them got together her brother would stop playing guitar all the time and then peace would return to her family.

I tried it the next day I had tutoring.

“Marin-sensei, as I recall you mentioned somebody rather incessant in their wooing? The rather overwhelming one...”

“Ah, I did. What about it?”

“Is he still interested in you?”

“Gosh, Reika-sama, what are you asking all of a sudden. ...Well, yes?”

I knew it!

“You said that he was not truly your type but what if you gave him a chance? I am sure he is a good person. What if you discovered that you liked him?”

“Eh-, well, yeah.”

“Indeed! If he suddenly begins singing to you, I hope that you will not run away!”

“Singing to me? I wonder what you mean. He doesn’t have any interest in music at all.”

“What if he does now! He’s going to sing and play to confess to you!”

Oops.

“Confess...?”

“Ah, that was supposed to be a surprise so...”

“I’m not sure what you mean by confess. I mean, we’re already dating.”

...Eh?

“Dating?”

“Yes. He was just so earnest about it all that I couldn’t help but say yes.”

Marin-sensei showed me a picture of the two of them together. The man was a diligent-looking man who wouldn’t look out of place as a researcher.

Slim, and definitely not muscley.

“Eh-, I thought you said that he was overwhelming... And the complete opposite to the visual kei type...”

“Aah, well, he just kept saying he liked me over and over again so it was a little

overwhelming. And don't you think these serious types have the complete opposite personality to visual kei rockers?"

"Aah... I see... Ah! Umm! Were there any over men that were interested in you? Like perhaps a muscley man."

"Nope."

"No?"

"Nope."

I GOT THE WRONG GUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUY!!

Of course. How could there be such a convenient development!

What do I do. I have to quickly let Aoi-chan know or else.

While Marin-sensei was boasting fondly about her boyfriend I got permission to send a text to my friend. Just as I was about to write something a text from Aoi-chan came.

"What do I do!? Oniichan's gotten into death metal! He's even started using Mum's make-up and she's super angry at him now! It's scary! How am I going to sleep tonight!?"

WHAT DO I DOO!?

Oh man. Oh man, oh man. I don't think I'll be able to face her family now.

With trembling hands I told her that it was the wrong person, as I prayed that it wasn't too late.

...Muscles-oniisan, wanna join my Forever Alone Village?

AAAHH! I'M SO SORRY!

CHAPTER 85

As an apology for confusing the crap out of him, I sent Aoi-chan's brother some high class protein supplements.

Apparently the girl he liked was named literally just 'Mari'. I should have checked to begin with. He's a nice guy so he told me that it wasn't my fault and not to worry, and Aoi-chan wasn't angry at me in the slightest so things were settled for now.

Because of the strong opposition from all around him, Aoi-chan's oniisan stopped with the song writing. He's still been playing the guitar though. One day Aoi-chan called and told me,

"Oniichan's started a weird guitar comedy routine..."

Stay strong, Aoi-chan!

Anyhow, life passed by and one day I received an invitation to an opening party for one of the Kaburagi Group's associate companies.

"I recall declining last time. Otousama, Okaasama, just go by yourselves."

"Yeah, but last time when I met Chairman Kaburagi we talked, and when I mentioned you he told me to bring you next time."

Ever since I gave him that tanuki doll he's been going around talking about me like I'm some sort of fathercon. I first heard about it from somebody in the Pivoine:

"I hear that you get along very well with your father, Reika-sama."

First I'd heard of it. Boy was that a surprise.

Everybody in the upper class already knows about me as a long-time brocon but recently fathercon has been added to the list too. I find that offensive.

But in the end it's just Otousama's boasting. The brocon stuff is all true but the fathercon rumours aren't really sticking. And for good reason. It's all baseless.

"I am still in high school so I shall decline for now."

"Yeah, but I've already told him that you were going. So come with, Reika?"

HAHH?

Forcing me to go to a Kaburagi party of all things!?

"Reika," Okaasama cut in. "Masaya-sama might be at this party! How about we show him your new dress?"

That was what I wanted to avoid the most though. Okaasama was rather too cheerful about the whole thing.

And I've got my end of term exams too. Instead I have to play dress-up doll for her?

"It's fine," said Otousama. "I'll make sure to escort you, Reika."

What on earth is this tanuki saying.

"No, I'll have Oniisama do so if you please."

Hmph! You think looking depressed like that is enough for me to feel sorry for you!

For a while I considered telling Kaburagi I was coming, but in the end I decided against it. To begin with I dunno if he's even coming, and if he said 'So?' I wouldn't know what to say.

Anyway, the day of the party came in no time at all.

Corporate parties are really boring. Growing up I avoided as many as possible on the basis that I was still a child, but I suppose I'll be seeing more and more of these from now on. What a pain, geez. Incidentally, Kaburagi didn't come.

Oniisama escorted me as I kept a smile on my face. Some of the parents of fellow Pivoine members were there so I made some polite conversation. Most of it was talking about how wonderful their children were.

Both my parents were doing basically the same thing elsewhere.

"Tired, Reika?"

"I am still fine."

"Yeah? It'll only be a bit longer, so hold on."

Supported by Oniisama's soft encouragement, I fired myself up for another meet and greet.

"Gokigen'yoh. I am Kisshouin Reika."

At that moment a voice called out from behind.

"Thanks for coming, Takateru-kun."

"Why if it isn't Chairman Kaburagi. Thank you for the invitation tonight."

Chairman Kaburagi!? Kaburagi's dad!?

I turned around in a hurry.

-DOKKINNN!!-

Kaburagi's dad was this unbelievably stylish ojisama.

I've always avoided their family so it was my first time seeing him up close.

He's probably Otousama's age by what the heck is this different!? His belly isn't coming out at all! And even his crow's feet make him look refined instead of old. Not only that but his eyes seem both sharp and magnanimous! It's a flood of charisma! SO COOOL!!! And WHOA, he's freaking tall!

He's like Beethoven's Emperor Concerto.

Completely unlike his son's Night On Bald Mountain. This man is a *true* emperor!

He was just so awesome that I couldn't help but stare dumbly for a while.

"This is my younger sister, Reika. Come on Reika, it's Chairman Kaburagi."

"Good evening, Reika-san. Thank you for coming tonight."

The elegant ojisama smiled at me.

Oh no! This isn't the time to be spacing out!

"Thank you very much for your invitation tonight. I am Kisshouin Reika," I replied politely, suppressing the wild beating of my heart.

Holy crap, please let me leave a good impression with *him at least.

“No need to be so polite. You’re in Masaya’s year, aren’t you. I hope he hasn’t been causing you trouble.”

“No, not at all. Masaya-sama is an amazing and talented person.”

We’re not close enough for that.

“I hear that you’re doing well yourself, Reika-san. Your father must be proud of you. I heard that you always bake sweets for your beloved father. Ah, and there was a plush toy recently too, wasn’t there. Goodness, I wish I had a daughter. I’m envious of your father.”

Otousama, you’re exaggerating too much!

What the heck has he been saying about me. It’s so scary I can’t even think about it.

“Chairman Kaburagi, thank you for earlier.”

Speak of the devil.

“Ah, it’s you, Chairman Kisshouin. I was just speaking to the children you and your lovely wife are so proud of. Reika-san really is a lovely young lady. I expected no less from your beloved daughter.”

“Haha, thank you, Chairman Kaburagi.”

Oi, you’re supposed to say ‘you flatter us’ there, Tanuki.

Next to the chubby Tanuki, Kaburagi’s otousan looked even cooler than usual. I have to hand it to Okaasama, she’s pretty amazing for not feeling disappointed when her husband is standing next to this guy.

After that, the tanuki began to share secret and vastly exaggerated tales of how well

he got along with his daughter.

Somebody save me.

The big-hearted Chairman Kaburagi went along with the tanuki's delusions with a smile.

At the end of it all, Chairman Kaburagi told me,

"I hope we'll meet again, Reika-san."

Again with a dazzling smile.

Wow... So dreamy...

Wai-, this isn't the time for this, Reika!

You vowed to stay away from the Kaburagi family so what are you doing getting familiar...

I have to get back on track!

A few days later in the salon, Kaburagi came up to me and laughed,

"Heard it from my pops but not only are you a brocon, you're a fathercon on top of that?"

TANUKIIIIIIIIII!!

CHAPTER 86

Class Rep passed me in the hallway so I grabbed his arm and dragged him off.

“Eh-, what’s wrong, Kisshouin-san?”

“Class Rep, I cannot imagine that it is true but in addition to your poetry, by any chance have you also dipped your toes into composing love songs?”

“EH!? How did you know!?”

I freaking knew it!

His disease is getting worse by the day. What a tragic discovery.

“I will not speak ill of your hobbies, Class Rep, however I sincerely hope that you are not thinking of singing to the girl in question. *Gasp!* It cannot be that you intend to do so at the school festival again!?”

“Nono, even I know that would be bad.”

Oh! Has he grown?

“Incidentally, what genre of song is it?”

“...It’s a secret,” he said with a blush.

Damned maiden.

“...I guess girls just find it a bother when somebody suddenly sings a song written for

them?”

“I suppose. Not every girl is the same. I suppose the average girl would be shocked before happy.”

“I see...”

Class Rep dropped his head. So he really wants to sing, huh.

Perhaps I should confirm his intentions one more time when the school festival comes. I can't discount the possibility that he'll go into a frenzy and sing anyway.

“Instead of singing a strange song that you wrote, you might be better received singing an existing song for her instead.”

“I see.”

“Indeed. A while back, a certain person played a love song on piano. It was wonderful, and the girls were all over it. It shames me to say that even I felt a little something. It was surprising, coming from him. That is the key, Class Rep. Gap moe. Gap moe is everything.”

“Gap moe... I'm surprised you even know the word, Kisshouin-san. But hm, a gap in my image... Would it be surprising if I started playing instruments?”

“The diligent class representative playing a passionate song of love. I suppose it would be quite a gap indeed. Take care to choose the right song, though.”

“Like what? Something that brings to mind the ocean after all? Or would a song on piano be better?”

“The piano might be nice.”

“The problem is when I can play it...”

Suddenly...

“Class Rep, what’s wrong? Are you okay!?”

While the two of us were chatting in secret, Fellow Stalking Horse suddenly rushed out at us.

“Ah, Mizuzaki-kun. Did you need me?”

“No, I was going to ask if anything was wrong. She brought you over here, after all.”

Over here? Uh, we’re just in a normal hallway, but?

“Huh? I was just talking with her.”

“However...”

Stalking Horse seemed really worried for him. He even casually shielded him from me. Hey, Stalking Horse, am I like some unthinkable fiend in your mind?

“...Umm, I don’t really get it, but I think you might be misunderstanding Kisshouin-san. It’s impossible that she’d do anything bad to me. I mean, she’s my love guru.”

“Love guru?”

“Yeah. Since primary school. She always gives me advice.”

Class Rep started shyly fiddling with his hair. Damned maiden.

“A love guru. For a love guru I’ve heard very little word about you having your own boyfriend.”

Oi, the hell are you saying, Stalking Horse. You picking a fight here? I don’t wanna hear this sass from the damned Vice Chief.

...I mean, I know Stalking Horse is pretty popular with the girls and all, but like, don’t they call me Goddess too?

“More importantly I had no idea there was a girl you liked.”

“EHH! Gosh, Mizusaki-kun, keep it a secret okay?”

The maiden blushed harder.

If Stalking Horse didn’t know then I can only assume that people had slowly forgotten about the poem. Good for you, Maiden. I’ll never forget it though.

“Should I help out then?”

“Eh-, really?”

Class Rep seemed ready to take up Fellow Stalking Horse’s offer so I quickly grabbed his arm.

“You mustn’t, Class Rep!”

“Eh, why?”

Leaving Stalking Horse, I started to whisper in his ear.

“I hear that when a friend offers to help out, it is often the case that the girl will fall in love with said friend instead. Worse yet, Mizusaki-kun is a popular boy. You mustn’t. That way lies danger.”

“That makes sense.”

“One day she might even ask you to help her together with him.”

“Uwah. That’d be the worst. But I can see it happening~”

“Right?”

Discussion concluded.

“I’m grateful that you offered, Mizusaki-kun, but I think I’ll just keep getting help from Kisshouin-san,” he said, with his hand up.

Stalking Horse looked at me with suspicion again.

“You really are just talking about love, right? Class Rep, she’s not threatening you or anything?”

“EH! Of course not!”

Did I do something to Stalking Horse? He seems convinced that I’m a villain.

“Kisshouin-san really does give me good advice. She even told me about this great shrine for matchmaking.”

“...That’s really not much, is it.”

“No, it was plenty. It worked.”

Eh-, worked!?

“Wait, Class Rep, what might you be talking about?”

I was grabbing his arm again.

“You know the school trip? We walked about the park together. It wasn’t just us, of course, but wow, I had fun.”

Oh, the time when I was about to turn into a merlion. Something like that did happen, huh. That’s nice~ Making great memories on your trip. I didn’t have anything like that at all.

“Anyway, the point is that I don’t have any problems with Kisshouin-san so you don’t have anything to worry about, Mizusaki-kun.”

“...I see.”

Why do I have to be doubted like this. I might have to talk to him about this.

“Mizusaki-kun, might I have a word?”

“What?”

I asked Class Rep to give us some room but he looked at me in worry and asked,

“Is everything okay?”

This time it was Stalking Horse’s time to be bewildered.

Hah! See! Class Rep thinks that you’re the dangerous one, not me!

Anyway, the two of us left Class Rep behind but he was still looking worried.

“Say, Mizusaki-kun. Why is it that you seem to have such a bad impression of me? I cannot say I recall doing anything.”

“To me, at least.”

What?

“In our last year in middle school you threatened Tsuruhana, didn’t you. You said that if she disobeyed, you would crush her. And that you had the power to do so. I happened to see it by chance.”

THE TIME WITH THE FOLDING FAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!?!?

I knew that somebody might have seen that. And to think it was Fellow Stalking Horse. I suppose that explains my image then...

“I know she was reaping what she sowed. But I can’t stand people who threaten others with their authority. Not even if it’s how the mighty Pivoine like to do things. I’ll protect the students from you if I have to.”

WHOOAAAA, he’s like totally casting me as the villain here.

But I guess it can’t be helped after seeing that... I can’t even defend myself here.

“...Well, there were certain circumstances involved in that. Still, I understand your point.”

“That all? I’m leaving then.”

“Sure.”

Heaven knows, Earth knows, you know and I know. I keep telling the tanuki that, but to think I’d need hearing it myself. What a terrifying tanuki boomerang.

It’s going to be hard clearing my image, isn’t it~ And to be honest I’m still embarrassed about that fan thing so please forget about it already...

CHAPTER 87

With Marin-sensei's help, I managed to get past a term-end exam. I don't think I did well, though. That's why I decided I would enroll for summer cram school.

I guess I'm too weak-willed for self study. There's just too much temptation lying around the house. Each time there was some problem I couldn't solve I found myself needle felting, or rearranging my room, or something else.

I've decided that if I like the cram school I'll continue doing it in Term 2 as well. So please, anything but the remedials again...

The day of the last exam. It finished in the morning so I went home and got changed. Today I had somewhere to be.

The post office. I wanted to deposit some money, and to buy some postage stamps.

It's actually a small hobby of mine, stamp collecting. It's fun keeping some of the cute ones. I don't have anybody to send letters to, though.

I particularly like some of the anime ones, or the ones with cute figures on them. I have some robot anime ones, and some with characters from picture books.

There was also this Rococo Queen one. Naturally I bought some. I think you're meant to use multiple stamps or something so I bought extras just in case. Not that I have anywhere to send anything right now.

I was a little embarrassed because I was worried somebody would think I was cosplaying her, but I liked these the most so I'm glad I found the courage.

I hope I'll get to use them though. Aoi-chan would probably accept it with a smile. Maybe I'll send her something then~

I was wearing something more casual than most of my other outfits, a feminine dress with a ribbon below the chest. There was somewhere else I wanted to go today, so it wouldn't do to look too much like an ojousama.

Before going to the post office, I was going to have lunch at a soba restaurant, so I

chose something less eyecatching.

Geez, I'm so hungry. What should I have~

The soba place was in a mall building. Looking at the menu I found myself at a loss. Sansai vegetable soba would be good, but then chilled soba sounded appetising too. Aah, but it has to be tempura soba in the end!



It came with two prawns, and was delicious. I'm glad I picked this. It had plenty of spring onion too, which is good for the blood, right?

Actually it was so delicious that I ended up draining the broth dry. Mn, so satisfied!

After relaxing a bit, I headed to the post office, a large one nearby.

The counter was packed with people so I got a ticket and went to browse the stamps. These animal stamps are pretty nice, but I like these traditional art-themed ones too~ Maybe I'll get a few of these Japanese Waka poem stamps.

In the end I found some cute animal ones so I decided to buy those this time. I made up my mind to come again someday.

Happily making my way back to counter, I discovered that there was still quite a while until it was my turn. It was packed so there probably wasn't anywhere to sit either.

Ah well. I'm still young so a bit of standing won't kill me.

Just as I was thinking that, some salaryman gave me his seat.

What a gentleman! I guess even Japan has learnt the 'ladies first' custom. Thank you, nameless salaryman.

I thanked him with a smile and took a seat.

It's funny how small acts of kindness can really pick up your mood.

Not that I wasn't still feeling a bit ill from all the tempura soba I ate. I mean, I drank all the broth too.

As I rubbed my tummy unconsciously, the lady next to me asked,

"How many months?"

Months? What months?

"?"

"You look around 5 months, I'd guess? I hope you give birth to a healthy child."

"..."

... ..Eh?

Don't tell me... Don't tell me I've been mistaken for a pregnant woman!?

Why!? Because I rubbed my tummy!?

I'm not! It's just because my stomach is full!

"...I'm... not pregnant..."

"Eh?"

"There's no baby in there..."

I tensed my muscles and pulled in my stomach as far as possible. Which wasn't far, mind.

“Oh, oh goodness, I’m sorry,” she said, looking incredibly awkward as she found somewhere else to sit.

Gasp! Don’t tell me!

I turned around and the salaryman from earlier averted his gaze.

You too!?

So he gave me my seat because he thought I was pregnant!?

Holy hell...

Apparently I became pregnant without realising. I’ll bet some archangel will descend to announce my pregnancy at any moment now. Son of the God of the Fat Country, please hurry up and be born. If not I’ll be stuck with this belly forever.

...Haha. I really need to stop escaping reality. I was just getting fat.

And there was one other thing I needed to accept.

Could it be that I’m aging? Do I look old enough to be happily pregnant already?

Not only am I fat, I’m older-looking too?

Wow, these lights are kind of dazzling. So dazzling that my eyes are tearing up...

And it still wasn’t my turn at the counter yet—

After trying not to cry as I made my way home, I shut myself in my room and transformed into a hula-hooping devil.

Then I did sit-ups and crunches too. I noticed that I was less fit now.

Starting from the next day my lunches were going to be basically salad. I told the girls at school,

“The heat has been a bit much so my appetite has been dwindling...”

Although they replied with stuff like “Get better soon,” I’ll bet they all realised...

At the Pivoine I only drank tea. Apparently today's snack was blueberry tarts but I couldn't have any!

People keep recommending this or that but I could only reject them with an excuse about my appetite.

Even looking hurt.

While that was happening, Enjou who happened to pass by suddenly smiled and said,

"Do your best," before leaving.

He noticed too? Don't say needless things! You're making me even hungrier.

When I texted Sakura-chan my grievances, she suddenly replied,

"Zazen meditation, and waterfall training. Which do you want?"

Apparently she thought I ought to fix my weak will first. Not that she didn't have a point. I'm honestly one of those people who are harsh on others but easy on myself.

Anyway, that's why I now had a trip to a zazen session with Sakura-chan planned.

By the way, Sakura-chan, I'll probably fall asleep if I keep my eyes shut for more than three minutes but is that okay?

Also for some reason Okaasama suggested I go to some fasting camp with her. So there was that planned too.

Apparently my entire summer break was going to be dedicated to training and losing weight.

Is my third eye finally going to open!?

CHAPTER 88

The results for the finals were out. Naturally my name was nowhere to be seen.

The top-three were the same as ever. Kaburagi, Enjou, and Wakaba-chan in that order. Wakaba-chan really is such a smart cookie. You're amazing, Wakaba-chan~ This is going to make some people really unhappy though...

Oh! And Fellow Stalking-Horse dropped to 7th! Are you being a little careless about your studies, my comrade?! I'm not that smart so it's up to you to drag up the Stalking Horses, okay? You're the hope of our village. As candidate for next village head, you need to make us proud.

Anyhow, I ended up at rank 86. Uguh, it's so bad that I can't even talk about it! At this rate I might actually end up in the triple digits. Better take the summer studies seriously. Studying, dieting, spiritual training... This summer is going to be busy.

"Hey," Kikuno suddenly said. "How about we all go somewhere together this summer?"

Ehhhh! An outing with friends! That sounds wonderful!

"Do you think we'll be able to book anything in time?"

"My, what if you simply came to my family's villa?"

The girls began kicking up an excited fuss.

Since we basically all have villas, they started discussing which one we were going to use. I'd better ask my family as well.

I mean, I'm assuming that I'm included of course. I am, right? Right? I mean, I've got a villa too, so let me into the conversation?

On the last Sunday before the summer break officially began, Sakura-chan and I went

to do that Zazen meditation I mentioned.

First the Zen Master taught us how to sit and meditate properly, and then had us enter the temple. I was happy to find that it was cool inside. I don't think I would have been able to meditate if it was humid.

I couldn't manage the full lotus position so I sat down in the half-lotus instead, and half-closed my eyes. Focus. Control your breathing. Control your heart.

I mean the breathing part is fine and all but controlling my mind~? Weird thoughts kinda keep popping up.

Or so I thought, but with the room so quiet my mind started to calm down. My heart quieted down, and my eyes began to close.

Ah-, Zen Master-san suddenly stood behind me. Could he tell I was falling asleep? I leant to the left so that he could tap my shoulder with his stick. It hurt less than I'd expected. Was he holding back because I was a frail girl? But thanks to that I was getting sleepy again...

-smack-

By the end of it I was so drowsy that my body was swaying all over the place. I can't even remember if he hit me again.

After a thirty minute session of that, we had some tea and then the Zen Master gave us a sermon. Then it was onto rewriting sutras. Wow, I thought it was just going to be the meditation.

I placed the paper on top of the original and then began to trace it. Oh. This was easier than I thought. I used to do the same thing for writing practice as a child.

Turns out it wasn't that easy. Zen Master-san told us that by tracing this our hearts would be revealed. I looked at Sakura-chan's perfect kanji, and then looked at some of the weird squiggles on mine. I'll bet this one over here happened while I was thinking about the Japanese-style café we'd be going to after. My mind really is filled to the brim with worldly desires, isn't it.

After submitting our copies to the temple, our day at the temple was brought to a close.

“Reika. You didn’t learn a thing, did you,” said Sakura-chan, the very moment we reached the café. Oh. I had originally planned to reflect during the training, hadn’t I.

“Seriously, because of all the smacking sounds coming from the side I could barely concentrate myself. And I swear you started rocking back and forth near the end too...”

“That was a test of your heart and spirit, Sakura-chan. If something so little can sway you from the Path then I don’t know what to say to you.”

“...He should have smacked you with a real cane instead.”

I was just reciting what the Zen Master had said. And a real cane would have actually hurt.

“And today was so easy because I deliberately chose a mellow place for you, okay. Had we gone to one of the hardcore places you’d be tenderised steak right now.”

“Ehh~ But you got hit too.”

“I asked him to.”

Wow, you’re amazing.

“Well? Did you reflect at all...?”

She sighed as I stared at the sweets menu.

“Guess not, huh.”

You're wrong. I was just looking, that's all. I wasn't planning on eating at all, I swear.

"Ahh~ Nirvana isn't such an easy place to get into, you know~"

"I hope you fall onto the path of the chubster."

Stop that. Don't you remember what Mr. Zen Master said? Words have power so you shouldn't say cruel things to others, remember? How are you going to take responsibility if I really turn into a fatty?

"Look, you really need to start exercising, Reika. How about that hot yoga stuff, or maybe aerial yoga?"

"You sure do love yoga, Sakura-chan."

I've been doing my best with sit-ups and hula hoops, and I can just do yoga at home. If I'm going to go out of my way then maybe some other sport would be better.

Anyhow, I somehow managed to restrain myself from ordering one of the Japanese-styled sweets and forced myself to settle with a cold matcha drink instead.

When I don't eat my tummy shrinks. But it swells again the moment I do. Geez, this is why it's so easy to get careless~ It feels like I'll lose weight as soon as I start eating less.

But I was determined to stick to my guns this time. That time with the pregnancy misunderstanding was a huge shock. I was actually still pretty depressed about it.

I sealed away the dress from that day too. It had to be part of the problem.

And when I sit down my flab comes out, so I was sitting with my stomach clenched at all times.

"Say, Sakura-chan? Do I look too old?"

“Huh? No? Your face has been getting rounder these days so if anything you look awfully young. Don’t worry about it.”

So my face has been getting rounder...

Today was the first day of my summer cram school.

And wow, was this on a different scale to my middle school one.

We were allowed to sit wherever so I picked a middle seat, a bit further back than average.

I wonder if there are any Suiran kids. Hmmm. Everybody looks so smart.

While I was looking around, a group of boys and girls took the seats next to me. They all seemed to be friends. Whoaa... What is this feeling unbelievable sense of isolation. The bag of the boy next to me steadily encroached on my territory. But he had his back to me and was completely focused on the conversation with his friends. Why am I feeling so ignored.

Oh no. The trauma from my remedials...

Just as I was moping, the boy suddenly laughed like crazy and smacked me with his hand. Ow...

“Ah, soz.”

“...It is fine.”

More importantly, I’d appreciate it if you noticed your bag as well.

“Whoa! This chick is like a total rich girl ojousama!”

“And her hair is done up so neatly~”

Urgh.

“Hey, hey, what school you go to?” asked the boy behind me.

And he had a bunch of earrings too. So gaudy.

“...I attend Suiran.”

“Whoooooooooa! Suiraaan! Total rich girlll!”

I don’t know what was so interesting about it but they all seemed really intrigued. And although the girls had smiles on their faces, I could see them secretly appraising me. Scary...

“Hey, so what’s your name?”

“...My name is Kisshouin Reika.”

“Even your name sounds rich! Dooope!”

...What the hell.

...I picked completely the wrong seat.

No, I picked completely the wrong *cram school*.

This has got to be the first time I’ve ever been treated so carelessly in all my time as Kisshouin Reika.

This has got to be the worst treatment I’ve had short of that pregnancy incident. I have complete confidence that if I drew a fortune right now it would say “Huge Curse”.

“C’mon, cut that out. You’re troubling the poor girl. The ojousama of Suiran are just

totally different from us, you know?” said one of the guys next to Gaudy Piercings.

The girls started staying stuff like “Yeah, guys~ Cut it out~” as well.

Hmph! As if anybody thinks you mean it!

I played up my indifference and began looking through my coursework. It was time to make use of the mindset I cultivated at the temple!

But despite my best efforts, the idiot behind me wouldn’t stop pulling and playing with my hair! My hair of all things! Had we been born an era earlier I’d imprison you in the goddamned Bastille for that!

And who the heck pulls on a girl’s hair! Are you actually a high schooler? Are you actually?

The final straw was the fact that when class actually started all of the idiots around me turned out to be way smarter than I was.

That’s it. The moment I get home I’m performing a salt-exorcism on all four sides of my room.

CHAPTER 89

Ever since that first day, Gaudy Piercings continued to sit near me. Apparently his real name was Umewaka. “Gaudy Piercings” is enough for the likes of him.

“Hey, hey, Kisshouin-san! Say, you guys at Suiran are all like, ‘Gokigen’yoh’ right? Say it to me too! ‘Gokigen’yoh’~”

Annoying.

Starting the next day I made sure to bring questions and textbooks to read during the breaks. Hopefully if I looked busy enough he wouldn’t talk to me.

Sure, my secondary goal in coming here was to make some friends but it definitely wasn’t going to be those guys.

I continued to concentrate on my questions.

“Woowow. You’re so serious about studying, Kisshouin-san. Oh, you got that one wrong.”

Tsk!

Soon enough it was lunch. The cram school had one after each morning lecture. Almost all of the students went out to buy something to eat. Apparently Gaudy Piercings and his buddies were going outside as well.

I had my own lunch though, prepared by a chef hired by my family.

“Whooooaaa! Kisshouin-san, did your bentou come from a ryoutei or something!?”

...I should have waited for them to leave before opening this. Today’s lunch was a well-balanced square bentou.



“Looks yuum! Lemme have one?”

Hey cretin, do you really think I would? Let me tell you now that I’m stingy when it comes to food. Especially today. I actually wanted a little bit more than this but because of the diet thing I tried to cut down. You really think there’s enough for you as well?

“Umewaka~ It’s time for us to gooo!” pressed the girl with the short hair.

You hear that? It’s time for you to go.

“Ohh! Bye then, Kisshouin-san!”

Yes, yes, go, go. And don’t come back, either.

I immediately got started on enjoying my tiny, but delicious lunch. The boiled fish was delicious.



It went perfectly with my chilled gyokuro tea.



Gyokuro (Japanese: 玉露?, “jade dew”) is a type of shaded green tea from Japan. It differs from the standard sencha (a classic unshaded green tea) in being grown under the shade rather than the full sun. Gyokuro is one of the most expensive types of sencha available in Japan.

Anyhow, once the break was over, it was back to concentrating on my studies.

My days at cram school were pretty much a repeat of that.

Until one day, disaster struck.

That Gaudy Piercings stole one of my chakinzushi!

“Whooooooooooooooooo! This is suuuuper good! Kisshouin-san, don’t tell me your family actually owns a ryoutei!?”



Chakinzushi... Fresh ingredients mixed with vinegared rice, wrapped in a delicate layer of egg... and something that I only had *two* of... My chakinzushi...

“Mm? How come you’ve gone all still, Kisshouin-san? Did that maybe give you a shock? Don’t worry, I’ll treat you to lunch as an apology so come eat with us?”

I silently packed my things away, left my chair, and then left the classroom to make a call. My favourite man was busy right now, so I dialled my doormat backup.

“Take me to some good food *right now!*”

I jumped into a taxi and sped to my destination. Waiting excitedly for me at the company headquarters was my doormat tanuki.

“It makes me really happy that you’ve come to visit me. Come in, sit down!”

“Otousama, I only have an hour and a half. Let us hurry up and go somewhere!” I replied before dragging him by the arm.

“Ooh! Got it!”

After getting some quick directions from the secretary, we were exiting into the hallway when I bumped into my real man instead.

“Oh, Reika. Why are you here?” asked Oniisama.

“It seems Reika here wanted to have lunch with *me*. She came *all* the way here,” my father replied smugly.

I notice that he particularly emphasised “with me”.

Unfortunately for you, Otousama, you're just a man of convenience. A foody call, if you will.

Regardless, Oniisama saw us out with a smile. But the whole time that doormat tanuki kept emphasising to all the employees we passed that I was a massive fathercon and saying, "My daughter just wouldn't stop asking me to go out with her somewhere so I'll be back after lunch."

It felt a bit like a public execution. Damn tanuki.

Anyhow, Otousama took me to a high-class Chinese restaurant close by. It was multi-storied, had a nice view, and had private rooms as well, so you could eat in peace. Thanks to that it was popular.

I'm impressed that we even managed to get a reservation on such short notice. Impressed by Otousama's secretary, that is.

"Don't wait up, Reika. Eat as much as you want."

So first I started with my favourites.

Chilli-fried prawns,



Ebi Chili (えびちり ebi chiri?) is a Japanese dish derived from Shanghai-style Szechuan cuisine. It consists of stir-fried shrimp in chilli sauce. It has a history in Japan.

shark-fin soup,



Shark fin soup (or shark's fin soup) is a traditional soup or stewed item of Chinese cuisine and Vietnamese cuisine served at special occasions such as weddings and banquets, or as a luxury item in Chinese culture.

and scorched-rice with seafood.



Guoba is a Chinese food ingredient consisting of scorched rice. Guoba is also served in soups and stews and prominently featured in Szechuan cuisine. It is known as okoge in Japan.

Otousama had whole-boiled shark fin and Shanghai Mitten Crab fried rice.



Pretty extravagant for just a lunch, Otousama.

In the end we ordered some sides like dim sum as well, and it all became a little too much in terms of volume.

Today was special though. After all, tomorrow I was stuck fasting with Okaasama. It felt like I was having my last meal.

“How’s cram school, Reika?”

“I am giving my all.”

And I had better hurry up and finish this all before my lessons began again.

Speaking of which, I wonder if Otousama leaving so suddenly was a problem. It was worrying to think about. Then again, everybody we passed looked like super-elite professionals, so.

“Are you doing your job properly, Otousama?”

“What are you saying, Reika. Of course I am. Right, Sasajima?”

Incidentally, his secretary Sasajima-san was sitting at the table with us. At first they tried to decline because it was just lunch between father and daughter, but we ordered so much and I had to go soon too, so I asked them to help eat as a favour.

“Yes. The President is extremely busy each day.”

Well of course you’d say that, you’re his secretary. And also I note that “extremely busy” doesn’t necessarily mean “actually getting work done”.

“I hear that you have been training my brother since his days in school?”

“Yes. Takateru-san is truly outstanding. He is presently working with the sales department as well.”

I see. Oniisama did look busy. I wonder if he’s making sure to take lunch breaks. We continued to talk about Oniisama for a while so Otousama began to sulk a bit. Wow, your immaturity is showing, Otousama.

Now stuffed with food, I thanked Sasajima-san for keeping the time for us and then left my seat. Otousama wanted me to stay a bit longer but I was going to run late for class at this rate.

Speaking of which, shouldn’t he be hurrying back to the company?

Farewell, Otousama! Even if you try to lure me with dessert it won’t work!

I just barely made it back in time for class so all the seats were pretty much taken. I ended up on one of the last chairs in the corner. Which happened to be far away from Gaudy Piercing & co. so I wasn’t unhappy about it. My stomach was unhappy though. I had to use my bag and scarf to hide my tummy from view.

The next day was fasting with Okaasama.

I imagined that we would be training on some dojo deep in the mountains or something but she brought me to a first-class hotel instead.

Apparently we were going to spend the next two days getting into jacuzzis, going to beauty salons, and taking walks in the hotel’s famed garden. “Fasting in style” in other words.

The other people were pretty much all Okaasama’s acquaintances; married women from the upper class. According to her she couldn’t turn down the invitation so she dragged me with her instead. Well yeah, I mean, Okaasama was completely skinny so I don’t suppose she would need to fast.

To think that maintaining a social life would even call on you to fast. Terrible.

After getting a private medical check, the hotel staff explained our itinerary to us. Apparently the hotel would provide water, tea, and rice congee, but we were free to eat out, and they had a pool and gym too.

The women all immediately chose to go to the beauty salon. I ended up going with them as Okaasama's extra. One rotund older woman brought along a round ojousama. Her name was Narutomi Akimi, and she was 20. We were the only two young participants. Madam Narutomi said that she really hoped we would get along when she introduced us. Akimi-san kind of hid behind her mother with her head hanging. Wow, kind of shy for somebody older than me. Come on, I won't bite~

At that moment, Madam Kaburagi gallantly strode in. It was like the whole room started sparkling with her entrance.

That's right. Apparently this hotel was owned by the Kaburagi group. Apparently she heard that we were participating so she came here to say hello.

Of all things, a Kaburagi hotel...

That was my first thought.

But then I realised that just by being here it was like broadcasting that I was in need of a diet...

Kaburagi couldn't know. And I didn't want that dandy Kaburagi Papa to know either. I guess this is what you call a maiden's heart.

After Mrs. Kaburagi finished her greetings she spotted me hiding away, so she walked over with a smile.

“Reika-san, I’m glad you’ve come! It’s going to be a difficult two days, but hang in there! I’m cheering for you.”

“Yes, thank you very much...”

Embarrassing. So embarrassing. It was like admitting that I was fat. I’m still in the skinny zone for BMI measurements, okay!

Also after she mentioned cheering for me all the other madams started paying more attention to me. I endured with a forced smile.

After that, Mrs. Kaburagi flashed everybody one last smile before leaving like the wind.

I suppose it’s time to check out our accommodations.

CHAPTER 90

I was led to a twin bedroom suite filled with amenities. I wouldn't have expected less from a hotel owned by the Kaburagi group.

Unfortunately the fridge had nothing except water and ice thanks to the nature of our visit. It really hit me that I wasn't going to be eating for a while.

I decided to relax on the sofa for a bit with herbal tea. We were going to meet up with the others later for a walk in the park.

"Say, Okaasama, would Otousama not have been a better choice to bring to a fasting? I do believe that he needs it the most in our family."

"Your father has work. And fasting would not make him skinnier."

Ruthless.

"More importantly, it seems that Kaburagi-sama is very fond of you, Reika-san," she commented happily.

...I suppose it might have seemed that way to others.

"As expected of my daughter! You are so terribly cute after all. Of course she thought you were a match for Masaya-san!"

Whoa, whoa, stop that, Okaasama. You just made a leap across the Grand Canyon of logic.

After spending some time getting Okaasama back under control, we went and met up with the others.

The staff led us on a stroll through the huge garden, and the older ladies were apparently still talking about what happened earlier.

“Even Kaburagi-sama approves of Reika-san. Your daughter certainly has a different kind of quality to her.”

“My, ohoho! Ladies, please don’t flatter her so.”

Okaasama sounds arrogant even when she’s turning down praise. I could tell she was in a fantastic mood. As the women continued to pay my mother lip service, suddenly, I remembered that there was one other person here my age. I started feeling a bit bad for Akimi-san.

After that we all headed to the same room and had drinks for dinner. I was still completely hungry... Couldn’t we have at least had seconds? I wasn’t looking forward to repeating that on the next two days.

Next on the itinerary was a massage at the beauty salon. It was actually kind of focused on my midsection. A stomach massage? Uhyahyahyahya! It tickles! Gueh!

I woke up the next morning with a sad-looking stomach. Breakfast was in drinkable form again. I want to eat something solid...

There was a pool and gym available for us to use, but I could muster up the energy for a walk at best. How do you expect people to move without food...

As for Okaasama, after our lunchtime drinks she immediately headed back to our room to sleep. I guess she was basically giving up. In her place I went with the madams to do some yoga.

It was easy yoga; simple poses designed around a class to help us relax. I was so hungry though that my stomach kept making embarrassing gurgling sounds.

The housewives around me were happily chatting away. They sure had energy~ Where on earth were they getting that stamina from.

Actually they were so energetic that they started asking me questions like,

“Reika-san, do you have anybody you like?”

“Masaya-san from the Kaburagi family is in your school year, isn’t he?”

“What about Shuusuke-san from the Enjou family?”

“Has your Oniisama decided on a lady yet?”

They sure loved gossiping about the lovelives of the young...

Dinner was in drinkable form yet again. I was sick of this...

Sure, they changed the flavours each time but still...

Okaasama was whining on the phone to Otousama.

Since it was night time I had time to study from a textbook, but my empty stomach had completely removed the will to do a thing.

I decided to go for a walk to help my mood. Just as I stepped out, I came across Akimi-san.

...Oh, that's...

Hidden behind her back was a bag from the hotel patisserie.

Awkward...

Just as I had decided to pretend that I didn't see anything, Akimi-san hesitantly brought it forward.

"The drinks just wouldn't fill me up..." she said with a self-depreciating smile.

"Yes, I understand. *I* certainly feel famished," I smiled politely in return.

Ah, come on now. Don't look like that. It's not like we're hospitalised or anything, so if you want to eat, just eat.

"Reika-san, could we chat a little?"

The two of us went for a walk in the garden.

The lighting had made it incredibly beautiful. The two of us made our way over to one of the benches and sat down.

"After meeting you, Reika-san, I've been thinking... I really am a cowardly waste of space, aren't I."

"Eh?! Not at all!"

On the contrary, I don't think you'll ever meet a bigger coward than me. The Japanese have a saying, you know? 'A Three-Day Priest'; basically somebody who gives up at the

drop of the hat. If I didn't know any better I'd say they created that phrase just for me.

"The more they tell me that I can't eat, the more and more I want to."

"...I understand how you feel," I nodded vigorously.

Why does my stomach always growl the moment I decide to diet?

"I've been fat since I was little. I've tried losing weight a few times, but I always give up... The name Akimi(refulgent beauty) is wasted on me."

Whoa, whoa, you think the name Reika(resplendent flower) fits me any better? It means that I'm supposedly as lovely as a flower, you know? So lovely that all I do is eat all day, a lay-about tanuki pup who even got mistaken for a pregnant woman once. So there's really no need for you to smile so sadly with your bag of pastries, okay?

"It must be nice being you, Reika-san. You're so beautiful. I often hear rumours about Takateru-sama taking his younger sister out. He must be so proud of you. I'm envious."

"Umm, I am not quite sure what you mean..."

"...I have an older brother too. But he hates me because I'm fat and ugly, no doubt. Not once has he invited me anywhere."

Uhhh, yeaah, I think that's less Oniisama bringing me out, and more me tagging along, but...?

"Even Kaburagi-sama has her eye on you. You're really so amazing, Reika-san. Your father, Chairman Kisshouin, brags about you everywhere too, you know? Gosh, it's amazing how proud of you he is."

What the heck are you doing, damned tanuki! Just wait 'til I get home!

“My father is too doting with me. Goodness, this is embarrassing. I must warn him the next time I see him. And I will have you know that I am simply fat in places that others cannot see. My midsection for instance. Something that I seem to have inherited from my father, unfortunately. My stomach is a veritable marshmallow at the moment.”

“A veritable marshmallow? Goodness, you do say hilarious things,” she laughed with a kind smile. She was definitely on the chubby side, but that just made her cuter and more relaxing to be around. Really, there wasn't any reason for her to look down on herself so much. I suppose she kind of reminded me of Hanachirusato from the Tale of Genji?

I decided on cheering her up. That's why I started telling her all kinds of stories where I was the butt of the joke. Stuff like,

“Actually, once while wearing my school uniform the hook on my skirt popped when I sat down,”

or “So the moment I put it on in the changing room I heard a rip, so I bought it and never wore it again,”

or “This one day I ate a whole cake by myself and was bedridden from the stomach ache.”

Akimi-san listened to me as she laughed, but I had an inkling that she thought I was just exaggerating.

Naive.

Far from exaggerating, these stories were just the tip of the iceberg.

Unfortunately I still had plenty of embarrassing stories like “that time I was swinging from a rope and nearly stacked it,” or “that one time I crashed into the class rubbish bin,” and other such unmentionable tales.

Still, it looked like it worked a little. Akimi-san offered me a butter cookie in the shape of a leaf from her bag.



Butter cookie! I wanna eat! But I’m fasting right now! Why must you tempt me so!

Sensing my inner turmoil, Akimi-san smiled and told me,

“You know, it isn’t just me that’s sneaking out at night to eat, you know? Pretty much every single participant has been doing the same thing.”

“Ehhhh!?”

“I think it might only be your mother and you that’s actually fasting properly. The hotel staff keep quiet even if they see you. If they didn’t, how would I have bought these?”

Okaasamaaaa, we’ve been deceiveeed!

I’d *wondered* how everyone else was so energetic.

“...And here I was, so hungry that all I could think about was food...”

“Huhu, then shall we eat?”

“No, I think I shall hold on for a little longer. It would feel somewhat frustrating otherwise.”

“I suppose it would for you, Reika-san. Do your best.”

Since the air was beginning to get a bit chilly, the two of us decided to return to our rooms. Just to keep appearances up, I lent her my scarf to hide the bag of pastries with. She thanked me with a smile.

Do you think we’ve gotten a little closer?

Our final meal consisted of rice congee. Haaah~ Yummy...

Next to me, Okaasama seemed to be in total bliss. I get how you feel. I really do.

“The fasting course is now complete,” announced the staff.

And with that, we all prepared to leave.

Time to go home. Please let me go home.

The two of us went through our goodbyes before climbing into the awaiting car. Akimi-san even waved me goodbye as I left.

I’m hooome~!

Otousama and Oniisama were waiting with warm food prepared.

Obviously due to her weakened spirit, Okaasama was overcome with emotion and clung to Otousama in an embrace. Truly the Beauty and the Tanuki.

I tried the same thing with Oniisama as well, but when I did it he dodged. Why!

CHAPTER 91

Four days later I was suddenly rushed by Gaudy Piercings, right as I returned to cram school for the first time in a while.

“Kisshouin-saan! I’m so sorry!”

Uwah!? What’s with this guy!?

It creeped me out so I had taken a step back in reflex, but the guy didn’t mind and continued to rant.

“Since *that* happened, you haven’t been coming to cram school at all! I’ve been feeling so bad about it. I’m really sorry!”

Can somebody tell me what this guy is on about?

Then, who knows why, but he suddenly slumped in depression all on his own.

“You rushed out of the classroom right after, and you only came back when lunch ended. I was so worried that you were off crying somewhere.”

...Hmm? Oh! That time with the chakinzuchi!?

That’s right! I forget not the enmity you sowed on that day, scoundrel!

“And then you stopped coming as well. Was it because you didn’t wanna see me? Have you been crying at home every day?”

Oh yeah. Come to think of it, the day after the chakinzushi incident I skipped cram

school to do that fasting course, didn't I. Wow, it feels like so long ago. Aah, that course was hell~

Thanks to that though, apparently Gaudy Piercings came up with the idea that my feelings had been hurt, and had been arbitrarily wallowing in guilt for the last three days. My condolences.

I'm not going to tell him though. He stole my precious chakinzushi, so this is his punishment. Kekeke!

The enmity sowed due to food is a terrifying thing.

"I never thought you'd be hit with so much shock. I should have realised though. You're a real ojousama. You're more delicate than guys like us. You even look like you've lost weight over it."

Eh!? What was that!? Did he just say what I thought he did? Did he just say I look like I'd lost weight!?

...Gaudy Piercings, I'll make an exception just this once!

"Please do not trouble yourself over it. I was simply feeling under the weather, and had been resting at home," I smiled as I forgave him. Just this once I'd let go of the grudge. It could disappear along with the fat I'd lost.

"Really!? Thank goodness! If you're still feeling bad, then don't overdo it, okay? Come on, sit down."

Originally I had planned on sitting away from them, but before I knew it he had brought me over to his group. Ununu, what a crafty one.

"...been a while, Kisshouin-saan. Soorrry about this idiot."

"He's such a jerk for stealing your food like that."

“Ojousama suuure are delicate~ After all, Kisshouin-san stayed at home just for something like that.”

Bobcut was really casually being caustic.

“Kisshouin-san said she was ill. Hey, if you don’t feel well then you have to speak up, okay?”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Gaudy Piercings was oddly gentlemanly. I guess it’s because he came up with this image of me being some dainty, sheltered rich girl. Naive. While Gaudy Piercings was feeling guilty, I was living it up in a high class Chinese restaurant, stealing shark fin soup from Otousama.

But he said I’d lost weight... My last checkup said that I’d lost two kilos, certainly, but I knew the weight would return the moment I started eating again.

I decided that I would put in the effort to keep my midriff like this though.

Gaudy Piercings, thank you for the motivation.

Also, Gaudy Piercings, what was your real name again?

Break time came, and Gaudy Piercings’ group went out for lunch. As usual I had my bentou. After having a relaxing lunch, I had a skim through my textbook. I had already planned to have Marin-sensei help me catch up, but it wouldn’t hurt to try a bit on my own.

Coming back from his own lunch, Gaudy Piercings passed me a bag from a coffee shop.

Confused, I looked inside and found a prosciutto and vegetable panino.



“This is for last time. I’m not sure if food like this would taste good to an ojousama like you, but if you’re okay with it then please take it.”

Ehhh!? Thank you! I love this stuff! What the heck! You’re actually a pretty good guy, Gaudy Piercings.

“Thank you. I will definitely enjoy it later,” I smiled brightly.

Smiles are cheap for people who give me panini. Gaudy Piercings seemed happy as well.

“Umewaka~ Lend me your electronic dictionary~” called Bobcut.

Oh, that’s right. Umewaka. Thanks for reminding me, Bobcut.

Umewaka-kun, who gave me a panino, went to give Bobcut his e-dictionary, and then happily played around with his phone.

Since that day, I started talking to Umewaka-kun a little more. He was oddly overprotective. Like, he’d ask if my bag was too heavy, or mention that it was hot today and ask me if I was okay.

And each and every time, Bobcut's eyes would be lit up in jealousy. She was really easy to read. Sometimes she'd drop in a comment like,

"It must be nice, being a pampered ojou-sama~"

Really, really easy to read.

Umewaka-kun's group of friends was made up of three guys and two girls. The other girl was the one who sat next to me on the first day, and it seemed like she was close with the brown-haired guy. Thanks to that, she didn't seem to mind me as much as Bobcut did.

One day Bobcut caught me in the bathroom.

"You're really girly, Kisshouin-san. Me, I'm more frank and chill, and kind of like a guy, so all the boys treat me like one."

"I see."

It's also common-sense to girls that on the inside, the *self-proclaimed* frank, chill, and kind-of-like-a-guy women are actually the most frighteningly jealous women of all. It was honestly a bother, so I just left.

Umewaka-kun continued to worry about me, telling me to be careful about the heat, or asking if it was hard keeping my hair tidy.

Once I was curious enough to ask him why he bothered with me so much. His eyes lit up and he said to me,

"Because my beloved Beatrice is just like you, Kisshouin-san!"

So I asked him who Beatrice was, and he pulled out his phone to show me.

It was a dog.

“See? Isn’t she cute? She’s an American Cocker Spaniel and she’s got the roundest, cutest eyes. And your hair is just like my Beatrice’s, Kisshouin-san. The first time I saw you from behind, I thought, oh my god! It’s my Beatrice! My Bea-tan is such an angel.”

Umewaka-kun’s beloved dog was one of the types with wavy long hair, and she was wearing a ribbon on her head too.

After that, even though I never asked for it, Umewaka-kun started showing me pictures of his adorable Bea-tan, one after another. Bea-tan running happily. Bea-tan rolling on the floor. Bea-tan asleep. One after another, he continued animatedly showing them off to me.

Umewaka-kun was a hardcore dog lover.

“Beatrice’s hair is really long and it’s so hard to get the kinks out. I make sure to brush her hair everyday, too. How do you take care of your hair, Kisshouin-san? It’s really hard maintaining Bea-tan’s sausage curls.”

The former Umewaka-kun, now revised to Dog Lover-kun, apparently wanted my advice on long hair.

Dog Lover-kun, I might look like this but I’m still technically a human.

“...You truly love dogs, Umewaka-kun.”

“Yeah. Oh, look at this!” he said as he pointed proudly to his earring.

Looking carefully, it was a silver earring of a dog paw.

He was an honest-to-god dog lover.

“This is my favourite one, but I’ve also got a bone earring too. Wanna see? I’ll show you next time, okay?”

He was an honest-to-god, maniac dog lover.

“I might not be a dog, but perhaps it would help to know that I use a brush that a salon recommended me. The teeth are very fine to avoid tangles.”

“Oh, my Bea-tan has an exclusive brush too.”

“I might not be a dog, but perhaps it would help to know that I visit a salon at least once a month for hair treatment.”

“My Bea-tan also gets a trimming once a month!”

...Really, can you just give up on this comparison already, Dog Lover-kun?

“Also American Cocker Spaniels get fat really easily, so I have to take care about her food and exercise.”

We’re the same species!

I arrived home to find an invitation to tea, from Madam Kaburagi.

CHAPTER 92

...I didn't wanna go.

To begin with I didn't want anything to do with that family. Going now would be even worse because that fasting course would definitely come up. It would be as good as announcing,

'Hello everybody! I was fat enough to warrant fasting!'

...Yeah, no wayyy.

But thinking about it, a tea party probably meant that she wanted to get to know the kids in her son's school year. With a lot of other people there it wouldn't have been too bad. If it wasn't for the fasting issue, that is.

Actually, I had been invited to something like this a few times before, but I got out of it by pretending to be shy. It's a shame that something like that wasn't possible at my age. How depressing...

The days continued to pass by. Dog Lover-kun continued to force his 『I ♥ Beatrice!』 photo collection on me. Okaasama got excited about the tea party and began dragging me to beauty salons and clothes shopping. Before long, the day of the tea party had arrived.

It was a casual thing so I just brought some flowers and chocolates with me. Well, I say 'just' but this chocolate was actually bought from the newly opened Japanese branch of a French chocolatier. A rising star of the chocolate world, they call him. I decided on this since I figured the sweet-toothed Kaburagi might appreciate it.

Anyhow, I arrived there for the first time feeling nervous. It didn't take long for Madam Kaburagi to show me in, and I was brought to a large room overseeing the garden. Actually there were already a number of people there. Pretty much everybody was somebody from the Pivoine, so I let out a sigh of relief. Although naturally Kaburagi and Enjou were there too.

“Reika-san, might there be some people you haven’t met before? Allow me to introduce you,” said Mrs. Kaburagi before doing exactly that. Once she was done, she left to greet new guests.

I decided to just approach someone I knew. Nouzen Sarara-sama was here.

She was a Pivoine member, but spent most of her time reading quietly by herself. Sarara-sama had this tranquil and dignified air to her, and it felt like she lived in her own world, never taking part in the pointless conversations that the rest of us had. Any conversation I made might have seemed inane to her, so I’d always shied from talking to her. Thanks to that we weren’t really close.

I had to say though, I admired her constant composure. That was something I knew I had trouble with.

At any rate, it was surprising that somebody like Sarara-sama would even come to an event like this. I’d never seen her really talk to Kaburagi in the Pivoine salon, and neither he nor Enjou seemed to pay much attention to her.

Could it be that she was forced here by her parents like I was?

“Gokigen’yoh, Sarara-sama. I must admit I was not expecting you here.”

“Gokigen’yoh. Of all places, I wouldn’t have expected you here either, Reika-sama.”

“I must admit that this is my first time as a guest here. And you, Sarara-sama?”

“I do in fact visit here on occasion. The Kaburagi family are kind enough to allow me to peruse their book collection. Chairman Kaburagi is in fact a rare book collector.”

“Goodness, truly!?”

That dreamy Kaburagi-Papa’s hobby was books!? Gosh, why haven’t I been reading

more books! I don't know a thing about rare books! And what a refined hobby too!

In my mind, I pictured Kaburagi-Papa sitting in his study, dignified, reading from an old, leather-bound book...

It fits him so well! And what does my family's Tanuki do for fun!? Collecting reading glasses for his eyesight!?

"Truly. In his spare time he tours Europe looking for rare books on his own, you know. This wondrous collection is the direct result of all that effort!"

"Is that so?"

"It is! Think about it! Early copies of Huysmans' works! When I found out about it I couldn't stop the trembling!"

"...My."

It was the first time I'd ever seen the collected Sarara-sama talking so excitedly. I mean, I knew that she really liked her books, but I never thought she took them this seriously. I guess she had that same something that led people to getting dog paw earrings... We chatted some more. Apparently she was particularly fond of French literature. Scouring my brains for my meagre knowledge on that field, I managed to squeeze out the names Cocteau and Wilde. Her eyes lit up, and she began to, even more excitedly, list title after title, and passionately discussed(?) their contents.

Um, that's nice and all, Sarara-sama, but could you stop closing in on me like that?

At that moment, Mrs. Kaburagi came back with another girl. The girl had hair up to her shoulders, and the tips were lightly curled. Wow, what a casual.

“This is Maihama Ema-san from Yurinomiya. Everyone get along with her. Now that everybody is here, shall we begin the tea party!”

And that’s how it began. Maybe because his mother was right here, Kaburagi was even more silent than usual. He was literally giving only the bare minimum replies to Maihama-san who was desperately trying to start a conversation. Not that I couldn’t sympathise. A high-school boy being forced to attend a tea party with his mother? It was like some sort of strange punishment game, if you thought about it. Worse yet, there was no Yurie-sama here.

Apparently Yurie-sama and Aira-sama were in the UK right now, spending their break living with some host family.

I’ll bet anything that Kaburagi had wanted to go with.

Anyhow, Kaburagi, still morose, picked up a chocolate and put it into his mouth. His face betrayed faint surprise. Gotcha!

The chocolate that he ate just now was none other than the one I brought with me as a gift. How’s that, Kaburagi! It’s good, right!

Madam Kaburagi, sharp-eyed as usual, was quick to point out that it had been brought here by me.

“Hmm... Where’d you get this?”

I replied.

“So they opened a store in Japan...” he muttered.

He really knew his stuff.

“You like chocolates, Kaburagi-sama?”

“*Chocolat* isn’t bad.”

Ooh, “*shoh-koh-lah*”. Sorry, for being a commoner, Mr. Frenchman.

“Reika-san, the other day you stayed at one of our hotels with your Okaasama, didn’t you? How was it?”

“Yes. Your exclusive amenities were excellent. It was almost a shame to use them. I also enjoyed your garden. The way it lit up at night was simply magical.”

“My! Thank you! I’m glad that you enjoyed it.”

“Kisshouin-san, you stayed at one of the Kaburagi Group’s hotels?” Enjou suddenly asked.

“Well, yes...”

“Our hotel had some fasting course. To lose weight.”

KABURAGIIIIIIII!

I knew you knew! And you’ve revealed me here!?

What is wrong with you!? Haven’t you heard of tact!?

You don’t understand a girl’s heart at all!

“Fasting?”

“It’s one of the courses our hotel offers.”

“Wow. So Kisshouin-san was fasting...”

Enjou looked like he was struggling not to smile. Everyone else started talking about it as well. Wasn't this like publicly acknowledging that I was a fatty!

"My, it might have been a fasting course but it wasn't just for dieting," began Madam Kaburagi. "It was a detox course. Reika-san is skinny, so she wouldn't have needed to diet."

Unfortunately I doubt anybody believed her.

"Reika-san came to accompany her mother. She's very close with her parents. Chairman Kisshouin told me all about how she makes handmade chocolates for him every Valentine's."

Tanuki! You've been spreading trouble *again*!

"Gosh, I wish I had a daughter... Sons really aren't cute at all."

Kaburagi looked put out by his mother's words.

Then Maihama-san cut in.

"I know that you have a rule against home-made chocolates, but I'm attending desert school so please try one of mine!"

Also she was looking at me like I was some kind of rival.

"Don't want. If I'm going to be eating some rank amateur's mistakes, why shouldn't I eat a professional's successes instead."

Maihama-san, shot down.

Kaburagi, one of these days you should really learn the art of subtlety.

After that, people kept coming over and asking about my fasting, so I got offended and blurted out,

“Recently I went with a friend to clear my spirit with zazen meditation as well,”

when a senpai from the Pivoine replied with a shocked,

“Eh-, Reika-san, you’re one of *them*?”

Enjou was facing away from me, breathless with laughter. I wished I had a zen stick with me to teach him some manners.

Anyhow, as a result of me regaling my experiences, a number of people said that they were interested in trying the fasting course as well.

When it was time to leave, Madam Kaburagi commented,

“Today was really lively thanks to you. Come again, okay!”

It wasn’t fun for me at all though...

Also Maihama-san huffed, and turned away from me. What a funny person.

Returning home exhausted, I was ambushed by Okaasama who asked me all about the tea party, but when I mentioned that they found out we were fasting participants, she was crestfallen.

Half of that was her fault though.

CHAPTER 93

Serika-chan contacted me about our outing. I was so looking forward to it!

Actually, being honest with you I was a bit worried that I wouldn't get invited. But thank goodness. I guess I was just paranoid.

I made sure to mention that I was okay with us using my family's holiday villa, but in the end we seemed to have decided on another girl's. Gosh, I was really looking forward to it.

"Kisshouin-san, you seem really happy today," Umewaka-kun said when I arrived at cram school.

I guess it was showing.

"Yes, some friends of mine have decided on where to stay for our trip."

"Oooh, good for you! Going to a beach?"

"No, a summer resort."

"Whoaaa! As expected of an ojousama. You aren't going to the beach? I thought everyone went to the beach in summer!"

"You may have a point. You like the beach, Umewaka-kun?"

"Yeah! I'm going this year too! Long live babes in bikinis!"

"...I see. You prefer girls with good figures?"

“Yeah, I guess! I mean, the hourglass is a guy’s dream, right? If my Bea-tan was a human girl I’d bet she’d be the coy, sexy, bewitching type! Don’t you think so too, Kisshouin-san?”

“I suppose.”

“I knew it. I wonder if there’s a girl like that out there. A girl like Bea-tan!”

...Aren’t you the one that claimed I was the spitting image of Bea-tan? So it was just the hair? Only the hair was the same? So I’m not coy or sexy or bewitching, huh?

I was going to give him these cute dog-shaped chocolates that I found, but fat chance now.

The silver bone earring glinted in the light as Dog Lover-kun continued to laugh like an idiot.

I was in the bathroom when Bobcut and her friend walked in. As I began talking to Dog Lover-kun more and more, Bobcut’s gaze grew harder and harder. I had been considering staying at this cram school after the summer course ended, so this was becoming a bit of a problem. It was about time that I did something about it.

“Kisshouin-san, you and Umewaka seem to be getting *awwwfully* close these daaays. You actually don’t talk to anyone *except* Umewaka-kun.”

Oh boy.

“I am a little shy so I have problems approaching people first. I have actually wanted to talk to all of you more, Moriyama-san.”

“Hmmm~”

Moriyama-san referred to Bobcut.

Bobcut who didn't seem to believe me at all.

She was casting me a suspicious glance through the reflection of the mirror.

“All of my friends at Suiran are female too.”

“Hmmm~ Is that soo~ I was so suure that you had your eye on Umewaka, you know~?”

Wow, that was blunt.

“Certainly not. I already have somebody I like.”

So I'm not your rival, okay?

“Eh-!? Really!? Who, who? Somebody from Suiran?”

Bobcut really fell for it.

Who indeed... Who?

Naturally nobody like that existed. I came up with him just now to get her off my case. But who would be good. If I described somebody I had too much contact with it could have huge potential to backfire on me in the future. Kaburagi and Enjou were completely out of the question, obviously.

“A friend of my older brother. It is only a one-sided affection, however.”

“Wow, I had no idea! What's he like?”

“Mature, and completely dreamy. Whenever he comes over to visit he always brings me a cute bouquet. I have liked him since I was little.”

“Wow.”

“What’s this, what’s this? Kisshouin-san is into older guys?” cut in the other girl.

It seemed that Sakaki-san was interested as well.

“Yes. I prefer the gentle, calm, and magnanimous types.”

Like Oniisama.

“I see. So you were into older guys, Kisshouin-san. Then that’s the complete opposite of Umewaka’s type, isn’t it! He’s always so excitable.”

It looked like Bobcut had relaxed quite a bit.

“I suppose if I had to say it, Umewaka-kun reminds me more of a younger brother.”

“Yeahh, spot on. That idiot always needs someone looking after him, you knowww?”

“Kisshouin-san, could it be that the person you like is some sort of celebrity?” asked Sakaki-san.

“I would hesitate to go as far to call him that, however... I suppose he is the heir to a large company.”

“Uwahh, I kneww it. The types that ojousama pair up with are all celebrities. No wayy would you be interested in someone like Umewaka~” agreed Bobcut.

“I should also note that Umewaka-kun’s preference is for ‘coy, sexy, bewitching’ girls with hourglass figures. He mentioned as such to me, and openly wondered if such a girl existed out there for him.”

“He said something that retarded? But huh. Hourglass, huh.”

Bobcut gave me a once over and then smiled brightly.

“Umewaka’s such a jerk. If that idiot gives you any trouble, just give me a shout, okay? I’ll come running.”

“Thank you.”

Apparently my meagre assets relieved her...

The self-proclaimed frank, chill, boyish woman was apparently also a self-proclaimed older sister type, so I suddenly found myself with some support. She would be a powerful ally in disputes with other girls. In a dispute with a guy though, I’d probably find her promptly on the other side.

“I actually have some delicious chocolate with me today. If it pleases you, would you two like some?”

“Oh, I love chocolate.”

“I wanna try rich people chocolate too,” added Sakaki-san.

I was still walking on a tightrope, but for now Bobcut didn’t see me as a rival anymore. We headed back into the classroom while we continued chatting about my fictitious crush. My chocolates were shared with them – and them only – when Dog Lover-kun

shouted,

“Bea-tan chocolates!”

I ignored him.

Taking the chance to be extra sure about it, I spoke to Bobcut.

“Apparently my hair looks exactly like Umewaka-kun’s dog. He incessantly compares the two of us. He actually once mentioned that his dog’s hair was glossier.”

“What the heck! Hey, Umewaka! Apologise to Kisshouin-san!” she shouted, as she happily went off to accost him.

Still sitting there eating chocolates, Sakaki-san smirked at me.

“Not bad, Kisshouin-san.”

We were finally here at Karuizawa!



Ginza Street in Karuizawa, Nagano

It was just the six of us. The villa belonged to Kikuno-chan.
I was going to be sharing a room with Oomiya Ayame-chan.

I opened the window and found that the air was a little less humid than in Tokyo, which was wonderful.

After we got our luggage unpacked, between bouts of excited squealing, we all headed to the living room to talk about our plans.

Breakfast was taken care of by some staff here, but we decided on eating out or cooking for ourselves for our other meals.

We then headed out down the main street to have fun, eating sweets and picking up souvenirs like jam along the way.



Karuizawa is famous for its jam. The region was one of the earliest Japanese producers of jam, owing to Karuizawa being a popular summer holiday destination for foreign tourists in the Meiji era. Jam stores with over a hundred years of history still exist there, and it continues today in both its capacity as a major jam producer as well as a popular place for holiday homes.

Eventually we ate out for dinner, and then finally returned to the villa. With some snacks on hand, we spent our time chatting like crazy.

Gossip and rumours from school were some of the topics, and naturally the conversation turned to *those two* as well.

Were you one of the girls who preferred Kaburagi-sama, or one of the girls who preferred Enjou-sama?

“It has to be Kaburagi-sama for me. I’ve been in Team Kaburagi since primary school.”

“I think I might prefer the gentle Enjou-sama~ But of course I like Kaburagi-sama too!”

“Wha-! You can’t just choose both!”

“You know, it really gets on my nerves when people who just joined in middle school or high school try and get close to those two.”

“Me too. We’ve liked them for so much longer.”

Hmmm... Should I try some of that blueberry jam? But it’s night time. Maybe I shouldn’t. But if it’s just one bite...

“Which are you, Reika-sama?”

“Eh-, sorry, what was that?”

“Gosh, Reika-sama, haven’t you been listening at all? Kaburagi-sama or Enjou-sama. You prefer Kaburagi-sama for sure, right?”

“Goodness, but Reika-sama and Enjou-sama get along so well.”

“Hey, she’s close to Kaburagi-sama too.”

What an outrageous misunderstanding!

“I am not particularly close to either of them. Please let go of these strange misunderstandings.”

“My, but doesn’t Enjou-sama occasionally call out to you? He’s never done that to any other girls.”

“...Ummm, I actually heard that you attended a tea party at Kaburagi-sama’s house... Did that really happen?”

Where did you hear that!?

All the girls started squealing.

“That’s so wonderful! The Kaburagi family approves of her!”

“Reika-sama! I’m actually so jealous, but if it’s you I’ll definitely cheer for you!”

“Wai-!”

“I can’t believe you, Reika-sama. How could you hide something so important?”

Please stop saying these horrifying things!

“Please calm down, everyone! Really, enough with all of these odd ideas.”

“Ehhhhh~”

None of them seemed to accept that, so I cut them short.

“Kaburagi-sama has already set his heart on someone, has he not?”

“Ah...”

Everyone glanced at each other.

It was well-known that Kaburagi had a long-time crush on Yurie-sama.

The room was quiet after that, so we all turned in for the day.

The next morning Ayame-chan suddenly spoke to me.

“Reika-sama, you go to cram school, don’t you? Could it be you’ve been having trouble with your studies?”

Eh? What’s this all of a sudden?

CHAPTER 94

Moving into the second half of summer break, it was time for the annual Pivoine Summer Party.

It was still gorgeous and a good time, but after so many years a lot of the magic had worn off, and Oniisama had graduated too.

Okaasama was in high spirits since parties were always a chance to dress me up like a doll, so she dragged me all over the place to choose a dress.

This year we decided on a layered chiffon dress in light pink. Personally I thought it was a little too cutesy for me, but Okaasama was really pleased with it.

Thinking it was a good chance, casually I said,

“Say, Okaasama, since is it summer after all, I was thinking about changing my hairstyle...”

“My, that wouldn’t do. Okaasama loves your hairstyle as it is, Reika-san.”

...Thought so. I mean, I knew this would happen. I just wanted to try.

“You know, as a child your Okaasama really loved Jumeau bisque dolls. It was my dream that if I ever had a daughter I would dress her up to be just as cute as one.”

Um, I think that might be a bit impossible. Aren’t they blonde for starters?

Thank god though that she never tried hair dye with me...

If you actually did have a kid like an antique doll, wouldn’t it be kind of scary though? She’d be just like a living doll. That has to be scary. I’d be scared. I’ve always hated

dolls.

I mean, some of them are so realistic. Wouldn't you be scared that they'd come to life at night? Particularly the Japanese ones...

You know, my house still has some of them around. Some of them were bought when I was just born, and some of them were passed down. And the older they were the creepier they were.

And each year when we brought them out it would always be like,

'Huh? Were the eyes this squinted before? Was the mouth smirking like this before?'

It gave me the shivers. I swear their expressions changed each year.

And I know for a fact that they get hair cuts when we bring them to doll makers for maintenance.

...Does the hair grow or something? I've always been too scared of the answer to ask though.

Thankfully I at least stopped Okaasama from putting them in my room. Whenever I visit the doll room though, I swear they're watching me.

I wouldn't be surprised if that one antique one actually walked about at night. People always say that the old ones gain souls.

...Let's stop this. If I keep thinking about this I might really wake up to find her standing on my chest. And when we'd look each other in the eyes and my hair would turn white in an instant. It actually seems like it could happen.

...But bisque dolls, huh.

Can't be helped.

I decided to bear with my Rococo hairstyle for a little longer to help Okaasama fulfil her childhood dreams.

When I arrived at the Summer Party, Kaburagi and Enjou were already surrounded by a throng of girls.

Yurie-sama was still in the UK. I had been sure that Kaburagi would have skipped because of that, but I suppose he still had the sense to take these things seriously.

I exchanged greetings with other attendants with a drink in hand before heading out into the garden.

There was wind now that it was late, but it was still a little stuffy outside. It didn't change the fact that the rose arch was still my favourite place each year.

Looking at the garden, I recalled how I rang the bell with Oniisama during my first time here. How nostalgic.

I still had the photo framed in my room.

I continued standing there looking at the rose arch when I noticed a little boy and girl nearby. They were small enough that they were probably from the Petite Pivoine, and seemed to be hanging around hesitantly.

Oh, could it be?

"Do you want to try ringing the bell?" I asked.

With a start, the two of them turned to face me. I realised they were holding hands. It was adorable.

"No, umm..."

They exchanged a look but didn't know what to do.

"I have rung it before, myself. It was very fun. Go on. I will be right here with you."

“...Can we really?”

“Of course! Bells are made to be rung!”

They held the rope together and hesitantly pulled a little.

“My, the bell will hardly ring with a tug like that.”

With a bit of encouragement, the two of them pulled again, harder this time, and the bell began to ring. I pulled out my camera and took a photo.

A crowd started to form from the sound of it. Although the two kids were turning red, they were wearing happy smiles.

“Satisfied?”

“Yes! Thank you very much!”

“Thank you very much.”

Other people began to happily ring the bell as well. It felt like déjà vu.

I told the two of them that I would give them the photo at school later, and then they introduced themselves. Apparently they were in the same year, and were very close. How nice~ I didn't come out of primary school with any sweet memories like that. We spoke for a little longer after that before the pair began heading back to the hotel building as they waved at me. Before they left though, the girl stopped and bowed to me.

“Thank you very much, Reika-oneesama,” she smiled shyly before disappearing.

Reika-oneesama...

...So wonderful!!

Thinking about it, I don't think I had ever been called that before. The only exception was when Ririna was being sarcastic.

It was oddly moving. I didn't have much experience with being looked up to by somebody younger.

"Good evening, Kisshouin-san," interrupted Enjou while I was basking in afterglow of the 'onesama'.

I hadn't noticed him approaching at all. Are you a ninja or something!?

"Gokigen'yoh, Enjou-sama," I replied with a fake smile.

I made sure to be on guard. Interacting with this guy was like navigating a minefield.

"You're not going to ring the bell this time?"

"Eh-"

"Didn't you ring it before? With your Oniisan, if I'm remembering right."

Why did he know that!

"It's because Masaya looked like he was really envious of you."

Oh my god. Not only did he see the waltz, he even saw *that*!? And stop it! Stop reading my mind!

“The dress you’re wearing tonight really suits you. It looks like your dieting really paid off.”

“...Thank you.”

He still hadn’t forgotten about that...? Tsk, what an unpleasant guy.

“Masaya’s mum really loves you now, you know. She was talking about how she wanted to invite you to her dinner party too.”

“Eh.”

A dinner party? Don’t joke with me! That would be even worse than the tea party.

“You don’t look happy to hear that.”

“Oh, no, I feel very honoured.”

Oh crap. Was it showing on my face?

“Hmmm~”

I hated how it felt like he could see right through me. Why were there so many mind-readers around me.

“The wind is getting a little strong. I think I shall head back inside.”

With brisk steps I left him behind. Somehow it felt like he was laughing at me though.

Enjou had the same dark, unknowable depths as my Japanese dolls. Scary...

CHAPTER 95

School began again, and the results for the term-end exams were back. Students who did particularly well had their results posted up, and in the midst of all the scholarship students (Wakaba-chan included) were *those two*, as well as Fellow Stalking Horse again. They really were amazing~

Wakaba-chan seemed really happy about it. Good for her.

Thanks to all of these guys, the rest of us Suiran kids could save face. Thank you, thank you.

Not long after, it was time to elect the new Student Council President and Vice-President. It was a little lonely when I realised it was finally time for Tomoe-senpai to step down.

Despite it being officially an election, there weren't really many candidates and the majority were previous members of the Student Council. Because of that there wasn't much excitement.

This year's election wasn't any different. Our new StuCo President was pretty much who we all expected.

The new StuCo President didn't have Tomoe-senpai's charisma but he was a good enough leader amongst the second years. As for the Vice President, it was a diligent-looking senpai in glasses. Usually you'd expect the Vice President to be a scheming four-eyes, but this one seemed like the earnest sort.

Finally, Fellow Stalking Horse did as Tomoe-senpai suggested last term, and entered the StuCo as a 1st Year.

"Okay everybody! We are now choosing the participants for the Athletics Carnival!"

It was the next big event after the StuCo elections. I felt a bit sympathetic for how busy the new StuCo members would be, but they had veterans to help them so I hoped that would be enough.

This athletics carnival was going to be the first experience of the sort since I had become a high schooler. I was a little nervous too. I had to be careful not to make an idiot out of myself. Thankfully nobody in my class seemed to be too hung up over victory, so at least I wouldn't be hounded for a mistake.

"Next is the baton relay," I announced.

Satomi-kun was the first to volunteer for it, with others following behind him. We all had to participate in at least one event, so there was a lot of demand for the easy ones. I was going for the ball-toss as always.

"Next is the cavalry battle."

Suddenly all the males looked grim. Thankfully, however, the legendary Emperor Kaburagi had already announced his retirement from the cavalry battles. It probably wouldn't be the bloodbath it was in middle school.

"Well, if the Emperor isn't participating..."

Eventually some of the more athletic boys started discussing the idea with some enthusiasm. Among the topics discussed were who were going to be the riders, and who the strong enemies from other classes would be.

"Mizusaki is definitely gonna participate."

"He's strong. Remember last year? He squared off against Emperor near the end."

“Satomi! You join too!”

“Hmmm. I’ll think about it.”

The boys seemed really excited now. This school really was filled with cavalry battle maniacs.

Anyway, eventually we managed to get our ‘elite cavalry squad’ picked out, so it was onto the next event again.

“Next up is a dance available to all grades. This year, participating students are to be performing the quadrille,” I read.

For some reason a number of them looked up at me and then suddenly averted their eyes. Eh? What?

Anyhow, the dance event was included for the less athletically inclined so it wasn’t surprising that I immediately got volunteers. But the quadrille was supposed to get faster near the end. Were these guys going to be okay?

One of the boys falteringly raised a hand and asked,

“Umm... Kisshouin-san, you won’t be participating in the dance?”

“No. I plan on competing in the ball toss.”

“...I see.”

He looked a bit disappointed. Eh, why did he look so let down. Huh? Some of the other boys looked the same way. How come?

...Don’t tell me they wanted to dance with me?

Well, with my upbringing I wasn't totally unfamiliar with dancing after all. I wouldn't be *totally* surprised if somebody asked me to dance.

...Maybe it was finally my time to be popular.

I signed up for the three-legged race as well. That's why I was here to train with my partner, Ikoma-san.

"I'll give it my everything to avoid letting you down, Reika-sama!"

"Please take care of me."

Thus we began running around the yard, calling out a rhythm. It was more important to avoid falling than to go fast in this event, so the key was a lot of practice and synchronisation.

Other people were training too, in particular the people doing the baton race, which was the main event, really.

Tsuruhana-san was confident in her abilities, so she was amongst the ones running right now. She was as fast as you'd expect. Some other Outers weren't bad either, so they were competing against each other. Gee, I wish I could run that fast.

Some shrill squealing broke me out of my reverie. I looked over to find Kaburagi and Enjou running. So fast!

In lieu of the cavalry battle, Kaburagi was going to join the relay and the sprints this year. The guy was staggeringly fast. Just before the goals though, Enjou pulled out ahead.

"Shuusuke! One more!"

"Ehhhh~"

“C’mon! Again!”

Enjou went along without a break. It was hard work being a friend to somebody stupidly passionate about athletics carnivals.

I got off my break, and then the two of us began practising again.

My legs were exhausted from all the practice.

I was walking down the hallway, complaining to my friends about it, when suddenly Katsuragi “Bird-Brain” Birdboy came sauntering down the other way.

“Ah! The Violent Woman!”

“Goodness, why if it isn’t Bird-Brain-kun. What might a middle schooler be doing in the high school section?”

“None of your fucking business!”

“Oh, I see.”

“How dare you talk to Reika-sama that way!”

Birdboy was being outrageous as always.

“Reika-sama, what do you mean by ‘bird-brain’?”

“It is his nickname, of course. I bestowed it.”

“My! It fits him perfectly!”

'Hohoho!' laughed my followers.

Birdboy turned bright red.

"Shut up! You're just a-! You're just a girl with oversized screws attached to your head!"

"S-Screws!?"

Aah... I was feeling faint...

"Reika-sama!"

"Reika-sama, get a hold of yourself!"

Screws... Reika, the Rococo Screw-Head...

"Just how rude can you be! Reika-sama's hair isn't *that* curly!"

"Yeah! Damn you, Birdbrain!"

"...Calm yourselves, everyone."

I was probably just shocked because nobody had insulted my hair to my face before.

"The boy is simple. Pay no heed to his words. I certainly do not."

"As expected of Reika-sama. You're so big-hearted."

"Hohoho!"

I left that idiot behind and continued on my way. The idiot continued to scream from behind me though.

...I swore that one day I would definitely have my revenge.

CHAPTER 96

Note that the word for mouse and rat are the same in Japanese. Incidentally there's no such thing as a 'lobster'. Spiny lobsters are 'Ise Prawns' while the clawed lobsters that Americans are more familiar with are 'Sea Crayfish'. Honestly, the genetics kind of cements the fact that lobsters aren't real. If lobsters aren't real, how can our mouths be real.

At lunch I headed to the StuCo room for athletics carnival business. Tomoe-senpai was waiting inside.

"Tomoe-senpai!"

"Oh~? Kisshouin-san, long time no see!"

Ukyaa! He was as cool as ever!

"So why are you here today? Oh, permission to use the sports field, right?"

"Yes! What are *you* doing here, Senpai?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm just here to help out. It hasn't been long since we've changed members after all."

"I see."

For the next few weeks all class rep work involving the Student Council was going to be handled by *me*.

“So which events are you competing in, Kisshouin-san?”

“This year I shall be appearing in the ball toss event. The three-legged race as well.”

“Ah okay. Don’t get injured, alright?”

“Yes! What about you, Tomoe-senpai?”

“Me? I’m going to be doing the cavalry battle.”

The cavalry battle! I can’t believe I forgot! Tomoe-senpai was the one who squared off with that legendary cavalry maniac at the *very* end of their match, and almost won too! It was thanks to the battle with Tomoe-senpai that the idiot even began reading The Art of War to prepare for the next year.

If Tomoe-senpai of all people was going to be participating this year then Emperor was sure going to regret his retirement.

“I-! I shall be cheering for you!”

“I’m happy to hear you say that but shouldn’t you be cheering for your own class?”

It’s fine, it’s fine. If it’s for my first love I’ll be a thought-traitor as many times as it takes.

“It is no problem, Senpai! Please win!” I shouted with a fist pump.

“Alright! If you’re going to be cheering me on then I guess I have to give it my best. Oh, by the way, you were participating too, right?” he called out to someone behind me.

I turned around and Fellow Stalking Horse was there.

“Ah-, F- ...unny finding you here, Mizusaki-kun.”

Close call! Good save, Reika!

I never called him anything else in my head so I almost slipped up. If I actually called the guy ‘Fellow Stalking Horse’ to his face I’m pretty sure he would murder me.

I promised myself to be more careful in the future...

Anyhow, Fellow Stalking Horse was looking at me with suspicion.

“What was that just now?”

“Eh? What might you be speaking of?”

Ah. My eyes were looking up to the right again.

The suspicion on his face intensified. Oh dear...

“Arima. You’re joining the cavalry battle too, aren’t you?”

Thankfully, Tomoe-senpai drew Fellow Stalking Horse’s attention. Phew...

“Ah, yes. I am.”

I knew it.

“My class speculated that you would be a strong opponent, Mizusaki-kun,” I chimed in.

“Oh? So Arima’s strong then. Sounds like I’d better put some oomph into it.”

“Tomoe-senpai, *faito!*”

“Yeah!”

As we cheered, Fellow Stalking Horse just regarded the two of us with bewilderment. After a while, he held out a sheet of paper to Tomoe-senpai.

“...Sorry to interrupt while you’re having so much fun, but I wanted to talk to you about the proceedings of the athletics carnival.”

“Hm? What about it?”

Fellow Stalking Horse had taken Tomoe-senpai from me. Not that it could be helped though. This was more important.

The two of them began to talk about greeting visitors or something, so I decided it was time to excuse myself.

“Well then, please excuse me, Tomoe-senpai. Also Mizusaki-kun, I suppose.”

“You suppose...”

“Ahaha, thanks for your hard work, Kisshouin-san.”

Tomoe-senpai saw me off with a smile, and I left the room feeling elated.

Mizusaki “Fellow Stalking Horse” Arima(Has a Horse) riding a horse. Upfftupfft. Three

horses(馬) made a herd(羣).

I headed back to homeroom while thinking up stupid rhymes about it, only to find some kind of debacle with Satomi-kun in the middle of it.

“Is something the matter, Satomi-kun?”

“Ah, Kisshouin-san. Actually...”

According to Satomi-kun, the girl who was going to be competing in the costume race sprained her ankle during lunch and suddenly couldn’t compete. Right now she was in the nurse’s office.

Iwamuro Takashi-kun, a large boy in the Judo Club, was going to be the cross-dressing Cinderella. The girl who was just injured was supposed to be carrying a pumpkin in a rat costume.

“Who will replace her?”

“Do we have a girl who can replace her?”

A number of girls hadn’t returned from lunch yet, and none of the ones here seemed too enthusiastic. I guess nobody really wanted to dress up as a rat.

Hmm~ But dressing up in a costume?

I raised my hand.

“Shall I take her place then?”

“Eh-, *you*, Kisshouin-san!?”

“Reika-sama!?”

Everyone looked at me in shock.

“Yes. I was entered into the ball-tossing event, but I believe she can do so even with a sprained ankle. There should be no problems if the two of us exchange events, in that case. Of course, unless anything is stopping me I plan to participate in the ball-toss as well.”

“Are you really okay with that, Kisshouin-san?” Satomi-kun asked with some hesitation.

The costume race was a joke event, after all. I was probably one of the last people they’d have expected to participate. Admittedly I never would have if it wasn’t for this accident.

“I am fine with it,” I nodded. “I cannot promise that I will run particularly swiftly, however.”

Satomi-kun smiled.

“Then the replacement will be Kisshouin-san.”

Just as things were about to be settled, this time it was the girls in my group that complained.

“How could you make Reika-sama dress up like a rat!”

“She’s right! How could a rat costume be suitable for Reika-sama!”

And so the classroom turned noisy again. For some reason some of the other girls

started vocally agreeing about how cruel it was to me.

Um, guys? I don't actually mind this, you know? And you're calling it cruel now, but you do remember that the person I'm replacing is a girl too, right?

I tried to calm them down, but they wouldn't budge at all, shouting things like,

"How could you make Reika-sama dress up like some kind of amusement park mascot!"

When we realised we weren't going anywhere, people started suggesting alternatives.

"Then can't we just have Kisshouin-san take the part of Cinderella instead then?" said one boy.

More and more of the class seemed to get on-board with the idea.

"Kisshouin-san would be spot-on for a princess, after all."

"I thought it'd be pretty funny to force Iwamuro into crossdressing, but doing the costume seriously might be pretty good too."

The girls in my group seemed tentatively appeased. And so after all that tumult, I went from being the rat to Cinderella.

Me as Cinderella. But the problem was...

"Iwamuro, good for you! Looks like you're off the hook!"

"I remember you grumbling about it too!" said a friend as he thumped Iwamuro-kun on the shoulder.

"Yeah, thank goodness," he replied.

But I knew that was a lie. Because in the dress-fittings after the class had decided on Iwamuro-kun as our Cinderella, I noticed he looked a little happy to be wearing it. I suspected that he was crestfallen inside. Even now he looked a little sadder.

“Please wait, everybody. I am fine being the rat.”

Everyone looked shocked again.

“The costume is tailored to Iwamuro-kun’s measurements. Additionally, Cinderella is to be the anchor of the relay race. That would be too heavy a burden for me.”

“But Reika-sama...”

“In exchange, would it be acceptable for me to simply wear a grey dress, mouse ears, and mice slippers instead?”

Honestly, I was completely fine with the full body costume too but the girls around me weren’t likely to agree to that. Hence the compromise. I thought it would look pretty cute.

“Are you truly okay with that, Reika-sama?”

“I am. It would be dangerous to run in clothing ill-fit to me. And I must admit, I have been looking forward to seeing Iwamuro-kun in a dress!”

My classmates laughed.

“Iwamuro! Now that Kisshouin-san’s nominated you personally, there’s no more running away from this!”

“Give it your best, tranny Cinderella!”

Although Iwamuro-kun made resigned comments, his mouth was curved upwards. You really wanted to wear that Cinderella dress, didn't you.

I decided that tomorrow I'd gift him some of the unused make-up from home.

He would probably be even happier that way. Quite possible that he'd open a door to a world he could never come back from, though.

The next day when I brought the make-up kit, Iwamuro-kun exclaimed,

“Ehhhh!”

but didn't resist at all.

I put on some cream blush on his cheeks and then painted his mouth with lipstick, but he seemed delighted when he stood in front of the mirror.

In the end I secretly gave him a high quality facial mask to use the night before the athletics carnival. This way his skin would be silky smooth.

Iwamuro-kun teared up and declared that he would follow me. I had to say no to that.

Somehow a huge guy with a penchant for cross-dressing ended up attached to me...

CHAPTER 97

When I arrived at school on the day of the athletics carnival, Iwamuro-kun whispered for me to come with him. He wanted me to check his skin for him. Reaching out, I touched his face with the back of my hand. Mn, smooth and supple.

I told him as much and he thanked me happily before returning to the other boys. Perhaps it was impossible for him to go back now.

In the main events I was relegated to only cheering. My friends and I were watching from inside a tent to avoid the sun. Maybe I should have asked Iwamuro-kun for some sunscreen.

People had been gossiping about how Emperor was channelling his frustration from being unable to compete in the cavalry battle into training his team for the baton relay. They must have been true because his team passed over the baton like clockwork and took first place by far. It was actually a little scary how they seemed like some kind of army...

As for the girls in our grade, Tsuruhana-san did really well. I could already see her being cocky for a while.

Eventually it was time for the three-legged race so I headed to the starting line and tied myself to Ikoma-san. That was when I noticed that Wakaba-chan was at the starting line with me.

So Wakaba-chan was competing too? In the same group as me too. Was Wakaba-chan supposed to be good at sports again?

I decided not to worry about it though. I didn't have time to focus on others. We had trained pretty hard for this, so I wanted first place if possible.

"I'll give my all, Reika-sama!"

Ikoma-san was plenty fired up too.

With the signal fired, the two of us shot off while chanting in time. I heard a pair fall down behind us. We were near the finish line. I'm aiming for first place!

But just as victory was in our grasp, a pair shot past us from behind and took the prize! Because of the shock I missed a step, and we stumbled into second place. I looked up to find Wakaba-chan with the flag for first.

"We did it! First place!"

Wakaba-chan seemed overjoyed, but her partner's face screamed 'oh no' and she frantically tried to stop her.

"Eh? How come?" Wakaba-chan asked blankly.

Her partner whispered something in her ear, and then Wakaba-chan looked my way. Hm?

The girl pulled Wakaba-chan away and disappeared into the crowd.

"I'm sorry, Reika-sama. I can't believe I let you down..."

Ikoma-san looked discouraged and incredibly frustrated. Eh!? You don't have to take it *that* seriously!

"It was not meant to be. There was simply a faster pair than the two of us."

"But..."

"Shall we try our best in our next event? We still have the ball-toss, correct?"

“Yes...”

I’d never particularly cared about winning at anything at an athletics carnival, but I guess some people did.

That very same ball-toss event turned out to have Wakaba-chan once again. She appeared and competed, couldn’t control her ball toss, and hit somebody from another class running nearby.

As it turns out, that victim was Afrodite who caused a huge fuss, screaming,

“MY HAAAANDD!! MY LIFEE AS A VIOLINISTT!!”

which ended with a frantically apologising Wakaba-chan. While she was busy dealing with Afrodite, she ended up in last place.

...My condolences.

In the afternoon finally came my costume race.

My costume comprised a grey dress, grey leggings, and a large mouse-ear headband. We didn’t have mouse-pad gloves, so I was using ones for a cat instead. For safety, I was wearing running shoes on my feet. For the same reason I wasn’t allowed to carry a pumpkin in the other hand, so it was turned into a backpack instead. Compared to my team-mates who were obviously a Cinderella, a prince, and a fairy godmother, my costume felt a little more vague...

Wearing a blonde wig as well now, Iwamuro-kun came over to show me how he looked. His lips and cheeks were painted pink.

I mentioned that I had some gloss as well and asked if he wanted some.

“Definitely!”

was his reply. That's how I ended standing in front of a 170cm+ Judo Club member as he knelt in front of me with his eyes closed and lips puckered.

Eh? Was *I* supposed to do it?

Iwamuro-kun had climbed the steps of maidenhood a lot faster than expected. I made sure to use extra glossy lip gloss for him, and wasn't stingy with it either. Mn, mn. You're totally cute.

He stood in front of the mirror and then snuck in a few duck lips. Come back to us, Iwamuro-kun...

For some reason when it was my turn to race, the cheers of the crowd turned to noisy chatter. When I looked at the audience, a few of them even turned their eyes away uncomfortably. Why? Was it weird?

"Reika-sama! You're so dignified!"

And Serika-chan, Kikuno-chan, and my other girls began giving me weird cheers.

In the end we didn't get first place, but we did become the talk of the school. Cinderella seemed to be having a blast the whole time too. I gave him glittered gloss as a present.

After a lot of other events, it was finally time for the cavalry battle.

The participants from my class were some of the buffer guys, Iwamuro-kun included. He was a maiden on the inside though. Was this going to be okay?

When some of the more popular teams passed through the gate, the cheering seemed to erupt further. When the first years came out, Fellow Stalking Horse gained quite a lot of cheers from the girls. He was supposed to be my Vice Village Chief but he was popular. It was somehow really frustrating.

The one who gained the most cheers though was my beloved Tomoe-senpai. I clapped

like mad for him. Do your best, Tomoe-senpai!

The battle was even more intense than in middle school. I think it was because of the huge difference in physique and power.

But despite that, Fellow Stalking Horse was still fighting on par with our seniors, taking headbands left and right. O comrade! Bring glory and honour to our village!

Thinking about the maidenly Iwamuro-kun, I looked for him in worry but found a completely different person to the guy who had happily worn the Cinderella dress. He was roaring a war-cry as he charged through his enemies. Do your best too, Judo Club!

While all this was going on, Tomoe-senpai's team was mowing everyone down, racking up victories without a sweat.

You're so *goddamn cool*, Tomoe-senpai!!!

For the first time in a long time, I could hear O Fortuna roaring in my head!

I ended up entranced and stopped watching everybody else. When I snapped out of it, Iwamuro-kun had already lost. Sorry I wasn't watching. I'll lend you some facial toner to take care of that sunburn.

Fellow Stalking Horse was among the survivors. You're amazing, Fellow Stalking Horse!

But Fellow Stalking Horse was targeted by Tomoe-senpai. After falling for Tomoe-senpai's feint, he left an opening which Tomoe-senpai used to steal his headband. The bad boy grin that Tomoe-senpai wore when he did that sent my heart pounding!

Suddenly I wondered what Emperor was doing. I looked over and he was frowning with his fists clenched, staring doggedly at Tomoe-senpai's team. He looked positively mortified to be sitting out.

...If you're going to be this upset about it you should have just competed. I wonder why he even announced his retirement. What an idiot.

At the end, Tomoe-senpai squared off with another 3rd year team and won, becoming the king of this year's cavalry battle.

I stood up and vigorously applauded his gallant figure. It was a struggle just to not jump up and down while waving at him.

While I was clapping, Tomoe-senpai looked my way, and then gave a thumbs up as he winked and smiled. Eh-! Me!?

I couldn't help but look around and behind me, but Tomoe-senpai pointed right at me. He waved at me, before heading back with his friends, arms on shoulders.

I saw a phantom fountain of blood splurt from my nose.

CHAPTER 98

After the athletics carnival, Tomoe-senpai and I became a small topic of discussion.

“I had no idea you were so close to the former President.”

“To think he’d announce his victory and smile at you like that. Could it be that there’s actually something between you two?”

My friends loved talk about romance, so all of them were looking excited and expectant.

“I admire and look up to Tomoe-senpai very much, but we are not in the sort of relationship you are all imagining. If strange rumours caused trouble to him, I would not be able to face him...”

I made sure to quickly put out the fire.

“Ehhhh~ But you were cheering for him so passionately, Reika-sama. When I saw you two like that it sent my heart pounding, you know!”

“Me too!”

“But gosh, the former President was so dashing~! And he was even Champion!”

“He really was cool! I actually found out that he won last year too! He’s the two-time champion!”

“My!”

It looks like my heart wasn't the only one pierced by his smile. Everyone was using our interaction as an excuse to keep talking about him.

Hmmmm~ What do I do. It was basically nothing, but a rumour was a rumour...

When I heard the same rumours at the Pivoine Salon, that was when I started to worry a little.

After all, his actual girlfriend Kasumi-sama was here.

"I had no idea you were close with that Tomoe guy," started a third year upperclassman.

"Yes. He helped me a great deal when I was a class representative in middle school. I was made the vice representative of my class again this year, so he has been helping me once again."

"Ah, I see. I'm begging ya, at least don't tell me you like him or something."

"Goodness. Tomoe-senpai is somebody I respect very much."

Uuu, Kasumi-sama didn't seem too offended, but...

I couldn't imagine it was a good feeling to watch people gossip about your boyfriend and some other girl. I was rash.

Some of the older girls began talking about Emperor, so I used that topic change to get away. Kasumi-sama was sitting further away on a sofa, so I sidled down next to her.

"Kasumi-sama."

"My, Reika-sama. Gokigen'yoh," she said, meeting me with a smile.

“Ummm... I am unsure how to apologise for this, but...” I whispered.

“My! Huhu, don’t tell me you were worried about me? I’m completely fine.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. And he’s honestly surprisingly popular so this isn’t even close to the first time this has happened.”

“Eh-, is that so!?”

“Yep. So don’t you worry, Reika-san. Senju was happily telling me about how you cheered for him, you know?”

“Ah...haha”

Since she really didn’t seem to mind, I let out a tentative sigh of relief. I was like the homewrecker villainess by birth, so I was worried I might one day break up some couple by accident.

“More importantly, you really gave me a shock when you appeared in that rat costume. Whatever came over you?”

“Eh?”

Kasumi-sama gazed at me worriedly.

“The girl who was supposed to participate injured herself, so I became the replacement.”

“I see. But a rat costume... You really take your role as the class representative seriously, don’t you, Reika-sama.”

Ummm... Kasumi-sama was looking at me heartbroken, like I was some tragic heroine. I really didn’t know how to respond. Was the costume really that bad? I thought it was pretty tame compared to the gaudy Cinderella and Prince costumes.

Speaking of which, my friends kept trying to cheer me up when I got back from the costume race. And even when people in my class joked about Iwamuro-kun, nobody ever mentioned me.”

“...Was my costume so strange?”

“Not at all! You were very charming! However, I can’t say I have really ever heard of a Pivoine participating in the costume race before...”

She was right, come to think of it. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that as a Pivoine member.

“Was it perhaps the wrong decision...?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but...”

I think I could have done quite a few things better this athletics carnival. I made a note to reflect on it.

I happened to glance at my watch and realised it was time to be picked up by my chauffeur.

“I need to take my leave for today.”

“My, already?”

“Yes. I have lessons soon.”

“I see. Gokigen’yoh.”

After packing up, I was about to leave when I passed Kaburagi and Enjou.
Our eyes met.

“Oh, the stupid mouse.”

“Masaya.”

The whole salon went dead silent.

I forced a stiff smile onto my face.

“...Gokigen’yoh, Kaburagi-sama, Enjou-sama. You must be excusing me.”

I was about to leave again when Kaburagi looked at me seriously.

“Where was your mouse nose? What were you even supposed to be? Put in a bit more effort next year.”

“Masaya.”

...*Shut up*, you athletics carnival lunatic! Who let you decide that I would even be competing next year!

They wouldn’t let me have the nose, and to be honest even I have a little self-respect!

I stalked down the hallway and headed for my car.

When I returned home from piano practice I found Imari-sama there for the first time in a very long time.

“Imari-sama!”

“Hey, Reika-chan. How’ve you been?”

“Very well. And you, Imari-sama?”

“I’ve been great too.”

Today he was wearing a suit. Wow, this was the charm of an adult!

“What brings you to our home today?”

“I had something I wanted to borrow from Takateru. Gee, you’re still as cute as a doll, aren’t you Reika-chan.”

He patted me on the head.

“Imari, stop touching people’s sisters,” said Oniisama after flicking off Imari-sama’s hand.

“Gosh! Your Oniisama is so scaaary, isn’t he, Reika-chan. But *you’re* like the little sister I’ve always wanted. My family is filled with nothing but brothers. I know! Reika-chan, why don’t you marry my little brother? Then you’ll be my little sister for real. Ah, but I’d be more than happy to marry you too, you know?”

“Marry *you*, Imari-sama? Why, that would be like a dream come true.”

“Wouldn’t it? I’ll marry you any time, Reika-chan.”

The two of us laughed together, but Oniisama looked irritated for once.

“...Imari, come to my room.”

“I’m sorry, Older Brother, it was just a joke.”

“Shut it and come. Now.”

Imari-sama was literally dragged away. It was nice to see that they were as close as ever.

Speaking of which, hadn’t I made up a story about being in love with Imari-sama? I had totally forgotten about it. I decided to tell them when they got back.

‘Apparently I’ve always been in love with you, Imari-sama.’

I was sure that he and Oniisama would find it a riot as well.

When Imari-sama came back to the living room he looked gaunt. Talking business must have been exhausting. He was probably buried in work. After all, he said,

“I don’t think I can come here for a while, again...”

CHAPTER 99

Raijin is a god of lightning, thunder and storms in the Shinto religion and in Japanese mythology. He is typically depicted as a demon-looking spirit beating drums to create thunder, usually with the symbol tomoe drawn on the drums.

Fuujin is the Japanese god of the wind and one of the eldest Shinto gods. He is portrayed as a terrifying wizard-like demon, resembling a red headed green-skinned humanoid wearing a leopard skin, carrying a large bag of winds on his shoulders.

Together, statues of Raijin and Fuujin are found all over Japan at the gates of Japanese shrines and temples as protectors. Visitors to these sacred places must pass by the intimidating gaze of the gods before entering.



Raijin (left) and Fuujin(right)

Maruyama Oukyo, born Maruyama Masataka, was a Japanese artist active in the late 18th century. He moved to Kyoto, during which he studied artworks from Chinese, Japanese and Western sources. Maruyama Okyo was well known for his true-to-life paintings. The story, illustrated by the below print, tells of the time Oukyo painted a ghost so “realistically” that it came to life and frightened him.



A Girl With a Name / A Boy Without a One

My classmate Kisshouin Reika-sama was idolised by all the girls.

It was no surprise; Reika-sama looked like a princess and was as gorgeous as her name sake. Not only that but was a member of the elite Pivoine, and on top of that she was smart too. She was like the perfect girl.

A lot of girls had dreams about becoming close to her. I did too, but her group was filled with nothing but girls as beautiful as she was. When I thought about what might happen to me socially if I somehow upset her I could never find the courage to try.

Sometimes I wondered what her life was like.

I pictured her sipping tea gracefully as she sat in a garden field of flowers, maybe hosting a poetry recital. Mn, it fit her so well!

When I entered my second year of middle school came an unbelievable chance to get closer to her.

Of all things, Reika-sama was coming to the summer camp! It should have been one of the last places anyone would expect her.

None of her other friends were participating. It was just her, which was how I ended up sharing a room with her.

Sharing a room with *Reika-sama*! My heart was beating so hard from the anxiety that I might do something to offend her, but thankfully she just smiled at me and said,

“This will be my first time at Summer Camp, so I hope you will look after me.”

Even though Reika-sama was our age she was always calm. I had hardly ever seen her lose her composure. I wished I could be like that.

When night fell, it was time for the fireworks event. Reika-sama had started off by my

side, smiling happily as she watched, but before I knew it she had disappeared. I looked around for her a little, only to find Reika-sama and Class Rep alone in a corner enjoying sparklers together.

Eh-!? Don't tell me it was a forbidden love between lady and servant!?

Not that I actually believed that, but it was fun to interpret it that way.

My friend Miharuru-chan couldn't come this year because of her family so I decided to text her about it later. It was like the love between a princess and the chamberlain. Miharuru-chan would definitely find it interesting too.

To be sure, amongst us girls it was agreed that the one who suited Reika-sama best was Kaburagi-sama. But out of nowhere, a shocking rival appeared in the form of the Imperial Chamberlain, getting in between the Princess and the Emperor. I wondered what would happen next.

I never could quite fall asleep unless I was in complete darkness. When we found out we were sharing a room I told her about my worries, but Reika-sama agreed with a smile. Thank goodness.

When it came time for lights out, it was time for bed. I had been lying in the darkness for a while when suddenly I heard Reika-sama.

"Daro da- de ni da na nara!"

...Eh? What was that just now?

For some reason it sounded like the mnemonic for remembering na-adjectives...

Was she awake?

"Reika-sama? What's wrong?"

"..."

“Um, Reika-sama?”

“ ... ”

Eh... Don't tell me, sleep-talking!?

But she was speaking so clearly...

No, it must have been my imagination.

I decided to try and sleep.

After a little while, Reika-sama's voice rang out in the darkness again.

“Karo ka- kuu ii kere!”

This time was the mnemonic for i-adjectives!?

“...Reika-samaa~? Are you awaake~?”

“ ... ”

Apparently Reika-sama studied even in her dreams. As expected of her.

I pulled my futon up over my head.

I hoped she wouldn't begin reciting the Tsurezuregusa essays next...

The next morning was the hike. For some reason Reika-sama had taken a metal pole from somewhere and was using it like a traveller's walking stick.

Reika-sama?

That night, a ghost appeared.

When the noise woke me up, Reika-sama was already awake and peering into the hallway as she combed her hair. Having just woken up, her curls were a little looser than usual.

There was a huge fuss in the hallways. I asked someone what had happened and they told me that a girl had seen a ghost. It had been eating gore when it turned around and glared at her with eyes filled with hatred! So scary!

Everyone was in a terrified panic, but Reika-sama calmed us down and took control.

“No ghosts will appear again,” she declared.

Reika-sama was amazing! Just hearing her say that made us feel like nothing would hurt us!

Soon afterwards our teacher came and promised that they would carefully patrol the hallway. Appeased, we all went back to our rooms.

When I went back inside mine, I said to her,

“That was scary, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not Maruyama Oukyo...”

She seemed despondent. I didn’t quite catch what she said, but knowing how diligent she usually was, she must have felt responsible for all this as the leader of the girls. Even though it wasn’t her fault at all...

Just as she said, the ghost didn’t appear again that night, and morning came around. I thought that it was wonderful how she could act and think so calmly in a situation like that.

From summer camp onwards, I could now chat with Reika-sama.

Reika-sama was a rare type of Pivoine member who would accept the duties of a class rep. As another class representative, sometimes we planned and consulted with each

other for the various school events. As somebody who really admired her, I was really happy about being able to do so.

Sometimes I saw Class Rep talking to her intimately as well. Reika-sama was like a rose beyond anyone's reach, so it was rare for any boy to casually speak to her. Not bad, Chamberlain.

One day the shadow of *another* boy appeared around Reika-sama!

It was none other than the burly Iwamuro-kun from the Judo Club. Standing next to each other they looked like a princess and her mercenary bodyguard.

I asked about it with my friend in her class. Apparently Iwamuro-kun was Reika-sama's favourite these days, and she had had fun making him crossdress during the athletics carnival and school festival.

Iwamuro-kun hadn't been able to refuse her, and had obediently let her put make-up on him.

"The Beauty and the Beast thing is surprisingly nice," said my friend, but I was staunchly in the Emperor camp.

None of us wanted to see Kaburagi-sama end up dating someone unsuitable. If he had to date somebody anyway, then we wanted it to be somebody wonderful that we could accept.

Of course, everyone knew that Kaburagi-sama had been pining after Yurie-sama all this time, but if it had to be somebody other than Yurie-sama, we all agreed that only somebody as wonderful as Reika-sama would do.

Honestly, compared to some other girls I didn't even like Kaburagi-sama that much. If he ended up with some boring girl, though, I had no idea what some of his more hardcore fans would do.



In Suiran's first year high schoolers, there were three people that you absolutely could not cross.

One of them was the Last Boss of the girls, Kisshouin Reika.

She was the daughter of the prodigious Kisshouin family, and a member of the Pivoine. It was whispered that making an enemy out of her equated to making one of every girl in Suiran. She was that powerful.

It was rare to ever see her angered, true, and she was always surrounded in her clique with a confident smile, but rumour had it that when Tsuruhana Maki conceitedly tried to overthrow her, she used her folding fan to slap the girl into submission.

It must have been crazy... Fights between aristocrats are incredible...

Tsuruhana Maki and those like-minded friends of hers had really kicked up a fuss, but in the end they weren't a match for Goddess Kali(Curly).

Having said that, it wasn't like we were a match for Tsuruhana either. That chick is scaaary.

And god was it heaven and earth with how she treated us and Kaburagi's like. When it came to me she just dropped all honorifics and ordered me around! And if you tried to refuse she'd start threatening you!

"If Tsuruhana's gang go too far again, we'll snitch on her to Kali-sama!" we said amongst ourselves.

Actually directly talking to Kali-sama is too scary to actually do, though!

Anyhow, Kisshouin Reika was guarded by her own Raijin and Fuujin. Kazami Serika and Imamura Kikuno. These two were scary too.

If anybody slighted Kisshouin-san, these two would lead a huge group of girls to pressure them.

It had happened to me too, one time. I had just entered the same class as Kisshouin-san and happened to forget one of my forms.

Her followers all surrounded me and glared.

“Stop making trouble for Reika-sama or else.”

I immediately got somebody to bring the form from home.

One time, this one guy got dared to say “Kali” as she passed by. He was taken away by Kazami and Imamura’s gang later that day. When he came back he was deathly pale, and quiet like somebody else. What on earth did they say to you...

That incident scared the crap out of us, so we all decided not to use that name anymore. After all, what if by some chance Kisshouin-san herself found out? Maybe it wouldn’t be her group this time, but she’d come after us with her fan herself!

Actually, Kisshouin-san had a lot of other nicknames that we called her in secret. Right now there was Maki Maki Makkie, which her group hadn’t seemed to know about yet. Hm, also D(olly Gi)rll I guess. During the athletics carnival we had this huge joke about D(olly Gi)rll doing the quadrille. I was kind of looking forward to it too, but Kisshouin-san didn’t participate. What a shame. Even leaving the pun aside, it would have been cool to see somebody with hair like a princess do the quadrille.

For some reason though she entered the costume race dressed as a rat carrying a pumpkin!

All of the laughter from the previous entrants suddenly stopped. The Empress dressed as a rat...

Were we supposed to laugh like all the other entrants? Were we supposed to pretend we hadn’t seen it? Nobody knew what to do.

“It’s so tragic...!” seemed to be written all over the faces of Kazami and Imamura’s group as they cheered her on though, so we realised that the right choice was not to

laugh.

The Emperor and Enjou-kun were wide-eyed at her costume too, but...

“Do your best, Kisshouin-saaan!” laughed Class Rep as he cheered her on.

What a shock. Was Class Rep actually a huge deal!?

Still though, once her class realised that Kisshouin-san was okay with costumes, this time they’d decided on a cross-dressing café for the school festival.

Since Satomi was in her class, I asked him about it.

“Kisshouin-san was pretty cute as a mouse, but she’s cute as a butler too. You should come see, on the day,” he laughed.

So they really *were* making Kisshouin-san cross-dress!?

There were definitely roles in the back she could have taken instead... I asked Satomi why she wasn’t in one of those instead but he replied,

“Well lots of people know our class for being the one with Kisshouin-san in it, so why not use that to attract customers? Wouldn’t it be a waste otherwise?”

“What the hell. Aren’t you afraid?”

“Of what?”

“Of treating *Kisshouin Reika* that way. Wasn’t she outraged?”

“No way. Kisshouin-san is a big softy. She’s like a sheep inside. Oh! Maybe she could wear sheep ears on top of that. I’ll go ask about it!”

SATOMIIIIIIIIII! THERE'S SUCH A THING AS TOO MUCH GUTS!

Reika-san in a male butler suit with sheep ears...

...I decided I would go see the train-wreck.

CHAPTER 100

Irasshaimase(ee-rash-hai-ma-seh) means ‘please come in,’ and is used to welcome guests to restaurants and stores. I’m leaving it as-is because I’m pretty sure they shout these in “Japanese restaurants” in a lot of countries. Even when those “Japanese restaurants” are actually owned by Chinese or Korean people. Or sometimes even Mexicans, in the southern USA, so my friends tell me.

For the school festival, my class decided on a cross-dressing café.

At first it had just been ‘a café’ but after seeing how popular Iwamuro-kun as Cinderella was, we thought, ‘Hey, why not make the other boys put on a dress too?’

So then we thought, ‘Why not go all the way and have the girls cross-dress too?’ which is how we ended up with the boys as maids, and the girls as butlers.

But it was ‘maids’ of all things. Maids.

Somebody said that if we were going with maids we might as well go deeper and suggested goth loli maids instead. We immediately agreed.

Iwamuro-kun’s eyes were sparkling. I decided to discuss the specifics with him later.

As for me, at first the plan was just to help out preparing the food in the kitchen, but Satomi-kun said,

“Kisshouin-san absolutely needs to be out front!”

Thanks to that I ended up with a butler outfit as well. I didn’t know why he wanted me though.

My face was pretty girly and I had sausage curls too, so I doubted I could have become some hot guy butler.

Which was confirmed when I actually tried on the costume. I didn’t look very boyish.

Maybe I'll tie up my hair?

Still, it probably wouldn't matter. I doubt anyone would really notice me once I was standing in a terrifying horde of cross-dressing boys.

While I was thinking about it, Satomi-kun handed me a headband with animal ears on it.

"What might this be?"

"Sheep ears. A sheep(Hitsuji) butler(Shitsuji). Wouldn't it be cute? I really want you to wear it. Oh, and don't tie up your hair like that. It's your trademark. Don't you think your curls look a bit like a sheep's? Here," he said, putting them on my head.

An animal *again*...? Still...

"Just the ears?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"After the costume race, Kaburagi-sama asked me why I was not wearing a mouse nose."

"Eh... I don't think even I could ask you to wear one of those things."

"It does not sound very comfortable at all."

"...Yeah, let's just go with the ears this time."

"You seem terribly set on these ears."

"Yeah!"

And so with a brilliant smile on his face, Satomi-kun sealed my fate as a sheep.

His reasoning was, “Because you’re a sheep in wolf’s clothing, Kisshouin-san. It’s perfect for you!”

Satomi-kun, do I really look that scary?

Now with wearing ears along with the butler uniform, I had hard look at myself in the mirror.

I hoped this wasn’t too bad. What if I was heading into some crazy direction like Iwamuro-kun. I was supposed to be a Rococo Queen but somehow it felt like I was becoming a weird joke character...

Iwamuro-kun and I discussed the maid outfit. Were they going to wear bonnets or a headpiece? Were they going to wear a dress, or a blouse with a corseted high-waisted skirt? Were they going to use side hoops to make the skirts puffy? The point is we discussed a whole bunch of stuff.

Iwamuro-kun was insanely passionate about it and wouldn’t accept anything less than the ideal.

In the end we settled on a bonnets with sausage curl wigs. Somehow the wig looked familiar... Was that supposed to be my hair? Well, not that my hair was as curled as *that*, though.

“I admired how your hair was like a princess’, Master...” he said, as he fidgeted with his huge body.

It looked like he was finally beyond return. I needed to apologise to his parents. And also I don’t recall ever becoming a master, or taking a disciple. Don’t be led astray. Your master is in the Judo Club.

Still, I did up his make-up to make him a cute goth loli maid.

Unlike the costume race, I had time to spare this time, so I decided to give him fake eyelashes with teardrops. Maybe fake nails too.

Mn, mn. You're very pretty, Iwamuro-kun.

Our café was prospering from the get-go.

The boys had originally whined about not wanting to do it, but once the skirts were on they gradually started to compete in looking gorgeous. By the end, some of the quality was mind-blowing. Could it be that there were actually a lot of boys who wanted to cross-dress?

Thanks to that, us butler girls were the complement to the maids.

Our café, Café Sheep Dolly, was the sort where you could ask for a specific maid to serve you. Thanks to that, some of the popular maids were incredibly busy.

Anyhow, apparently the name of our store came from sheep butlers and doll-like maids, but I was the only one wearing sheep ears, wasn't I?

By the way, Café Sheep Dolly does not use, and has never used, Genetically Modified Food.

Suddenly, somebody asked for me.

The first person to select me was Tomoe-senpai!

"Tomoe-senpai! Irasshaimase!"

"I came, Kisshouin-san! Cute ears. A sheep(hitsuji) because you're a butler(shitsuji)?"

"So it appears..."

So it *was* weird? A bit late to change though.

"Well then, Miss Sheep, I'd like this rum raisin pound cake set, please."

“Yes, coming up!”

I quickly left to take his order to the kitchen.

He came just to see me! I was so happy! Ehehe, and he said that my sheep ears were cute!

Somehow it felt like things were really about to pick up!

After Tomoe-senpai, some of my friends from other classes came to visit. At one point Ririna even swaggered in and said,

“Hey you! The weird butler! Bring me some tea, now!”

I had quite a number of people ask for me. I was quite proud of my number, but in the end I still lost to goth loli Iwamuro-kun.

Satomi-kun praised me too.

“As expected of Kisshouin-san! Her ability to bring in customers is amazing!”

Tomorrow the school festival would be opened to the public. Better do my best!

When it was time for my shift break I went to visit the Handicrafts Club.

Each year they would make a wedding dress for the school festivals. Today they were unveiling the dress that they had begun designing and creating since April, the combined effort of the entire Handicrafts Club.

It was embroidered with intricate designs up to the cuffs, and amazing in a way that you’d never have expected it was made by high schoolers.

Since I was a (provisional) member, I added just one fabric rose to it. Back when I was silently watching them work on the dress, they invited me to help. I definitely didn’t

pressure them into it.

A number of people were in the room looking at it, Class Rep included. Truly a maiden entranced.

I snuck up behind him.

“Did you also want to try it on, Class Rep?”

“Uwah!? Kisshouin-san!”

The maiden Class Rep was visibly reddening. I see, I see. I hope your dream comes true, one day.

At that moment, Iwamuro-kun suddenly showed up as well. Yet another maiden entranced by it.

The maiden Class Rep, and the maiden from the Judo Club. It was a chance meeting of maidens.

The next day, Café Sheep Dolly was hitting it big.

Although the school festival was opened to outsiders now, they still required a ticket to get in so only friends and acquaintances of the students here could do so.

“Invite me too!” Dog Lover-kun had asked, but it would be annoying to be called a dog at school, so I politely declined him. Also I could already see him suggesting dog ears instead of the sheep ears. I was already being treated like some kind of sheepdog here so I didn’t need anything to jinx it.

Aoi-chan’s school festival was today as well, so she couldn’t come. What a shame.

As I was recalling this, somebody nominated me.

“Sakura-chan!”

It was Sakura-chan and Akisawa-kun.

“Gokigen’yoh, Reika-san.”

“Hello, Kisshouin-san. Sakurako came to visit so I brought her here.”

Our cross-dressing maids grew noisy at the thought of Akizawa-kun bringing a girl along.

“Reika-san, that butler outfit suits you very well. Those ears are interesting, too.”

Her eyes were totally laughing at me. Hmph.

Satomi-kun appeared from the staff-only area too.

“Welcome, Fukioka-san. Are you touring the school with Akizawa today?”

“Long time no see, Satomi-kun. I heard that Reika-san was wearing men’s clothing and I simply had to see.”

“I see. You two were friends as well?”

“Yes. I have been friends with Reika-san since our early days in primary.”

I’d been wondering for a while now, but what happened to not using honorifics? And what was with that modest smile she had on?

I could hear words like ‘pure’ and ‘yamato nadeshiko’ muttered amongst our cross-

dressing maids. Amazing, Sakura-chan. You've fooled them all. Your abilities as a faker are something legendary.

The two of them were going to tour the school now. It seemed that her real goal was to let the whole school know that she existed, and thus holding back any other girls who would think to get close to him.

That fact that Akizawa-kun had no idea about her plots made him lucky in a way.

In the afternoon, things suddenly got noisy. It turns out that Emperor and Enjou had come to Café Sheep Dolly! And following in behind them were Yurie-sama and Aira-sama! Oh, and Maihama-san too I guess.

The whole place descended into chaos at their arrival. Since they didn't ask for anybody in particular, I went to serve them.

"Long time no see, Reika-chan!" called Aira-sama.

I greeted everybody in return.

"Kisshouin-san," Enjou smiled, "First a rat, and now a sheep? Everybody's talking about it, you know."

"Where's the sheep nose?" criticised Kaburagi.

"A nose would make it difficult to breathe."

"Take this more seriously."

What the hell was this guy's problem.

"For the lady of the Kisshouin-family, you sure wear strange things," jabbed Maihama-

san as she fiddled with her hair. I guess she wasn't happy that Kaburagi had spoken to me.

"Ema," Yurie-sama chided "I'm sorry about her, Reika-san."

"Yurie-oneesama~" whined Maihama-san, before continuing.

"Dressing up, fasting, you sure do a lot of odd things, Reika-san. Huhu," she laughed.

Don't bring up the fasting!

"That sounded an *awful* lot like criticism of Masaya's mum. Maybe I should *tell* Obasama about this," smiled Enjou.

Suddenly Maihama-san was eager to change her mind. Idiot. Also, well said, you damned schemer.

When I had finished taking their orders and stepped into the kitchen, the five of them were still the centre of attention.

Maihama-san was sitting next to Kaburagi and trying all sorts of conversation starters. Kaburagi looked fed up as he diverted every attempt. Yurie-sama and Aira-sama were having fun evaluating each maid.

Getting so friendly with Kaburagi in Suiran was the same as making an enemy of many of the girls. Because of that, the café was increasingly filled with dangerous glares. Maihama-san only responded with with a triumphant smile though. Scaaary!

"Here, Kisshouin-san."

Satomi-kun handed me some tea, and the complimentary sheep cookies that we only

gave to female customers.

I placed one down in front of each of them. Yurie-sama and Aira-sama had yellow sheep butter cookies. Maihama-san got a black sheep cookie.

Those black sheep cookies were ones that only certain customers got. Now get the hell out, you troublemaker!

When the five of them were leaving, Aira-sama looked apologetic.

“Sorry for making you uncomfortable, Reika-chan.”

It hadn’t been her fault at all.

As for Kaburagi, Maihama-san was still orbiting him, and he still looked fed up as he left.

While I was feeling exhausted, Iwamuro-kun stood next to me.

“What half-baked curls. She’s nothing compared to you, Master.”

...Yeah. Thank you, Iwamuro-kun.

A month later when the term-end test results were posted, Kaburagi Masaya’s name was not amongst them.

CHAPTER 101

A little while after the school festival, Sakura-chan contacted me.

“I heard that Maihama Ema came to Suiran.”

“Mmn. Do you know her? She goes to your school, right?”

“We go to the same school. We are not close. Take care around Maihama Ema. That girl doesn’t hold back against girls that she doesn’t like. There are plenty of her victims in Yurinomiya.”

“Oh okay. Wait, don’t tell me that she’s bullied you too?”

“Hah? *Who?*”

Thought soo~ Even I couldn’t pick a fight with Sakura-chan and win...

“I saw Maihara Ema sticking around that famous Emperor so I was wondering if she was causing you problems, Reika. She’s been going around Yurinomiya boasting about how close she is with your Emperor.”

“Huuh~”

She *did* get invited to the tea party, and Yurie-sama seemed to know her well too, so maybe she was relatively close with him, but the guy himself seemed to have no desire to deal with her.

Ah, well. As long as it didn’t harm me.

So anyhow, the school festival ended on a nice note. I chatted with friends as usual. Sometimes I would go to the Handicrafts Club, and sometimes I'd drink tea in the salon. It was a peaceful autumn.

After a whole month like that, the term-end exams began. I studied desperately hard with Marin-sensei and on my own as well, and took the test with incredible vigour. It was the hardest I had ever studied since entering high school here. Maybe I could even reach the top 30!

A few days later the results were announced, and the school was hit with a bombshell.

1. Takamichi Wakaba
2. Enjou Shuusuke
3. Mizusaki Arima

Kaburagi's name wasn't there.

Why, Emperor!? You've fallen more than thirty places in one go!? Did you forget to write your name or something!? Did you shift all your multiple choice answers down a box!?

Far from just the first years, even the upperclassmen were speculating about what happened to the perfect His Majesty the Emperor.

And the Emperor himself hadn't come to school.

I joined in on the discussion too, while giving the leader-board another once over. My name wasn't there.

When I got my report card back it said I was rank 31.

...I was really too unlucky.

Emperor didn't come to school in the next few days either.

At first people whispered about him falling ill, but nothing was ever made clear. As for

his best friend Enjou, the guy wouldn't say anything either. Thanks to that it seemed like everybody had their own explanation.

He never appeared at the salon either. I could see our members growing worried.

Really though, what on earth was up with him. Was the shock from falling in rankings so bad that he changed schools or something!? Ah-! Was he skipping school because he didn't want to do remedials!?

Hmmmmmm... Huh? Speaking of which, when was the last time I even saw those two? Before the exams the salon was basically closed, and before that was...
...Well whatever.

More importantly, for some reason Kaburagi's fall from grace and absence was directly a lot of criticism towards Wakaba-chan.

'Not only did she steal first place while the Emperor was sick, she even went and took Enjou-sama's place!'

But how was that even her fault?

And I guess it was a pretty bad idea of hers to be happily shouting "First place!" while half the girls were in shock about Emperor not being up there. Kaburagi and Enjou fans began talking about how she did something or other to take 1st place from them. Complete nonsense.

Worse yet, the new president of the Pivoine was a Pivoine supremacist. Losing face to a commoner like Wakaba-chan was something incredibly unamusing to them.

Wakaba-chan, your position went to hell in an instant! Are you going to be okay!?

I was heading to the Handicrafts Club by myself when I crossed paths with Enjou, who was carrying his bag and heading to a car.

Ugh...

“Gokigen’yoh, Enjou-sama.”

I wanted nothing more than to ignore him, but I was a human being so I at least gave him a greeting.

“Hey, Kisshouin-san.”

He was smiling, but his face looked a little tired.

“You seem weary. Are you all right?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m fine. I’ve just got a lot of things going on, you know?”

I’ll bet you do. Right now the school is talking about nothing except your ‘things going on’.

“Are you curious too, Kisshouin-san? About what’s happening with Masaya.”

“Eh?”

Honestly speaking I was a little. Who wouldn’t be, with all this fuss? But curiosity killed the cat.

“No. I simply worry that he is in ill-health.”

“Ill health, huh...”

“Ummm... might he have truly fallen ill?”

“He’s... not well, in a sense. I’m not really sure myself.”

“Eh!?”

Not sure? Aren’t you supposed to be his best friend!?

“I haven’t really seen him, you see.”

“...Were you unable to visit him while he was ill?”

“Kisshouin-san, why don’t you come with me? We’ll go visit him together.”

Hell to the no...

“Just kidding. He’s not even at home, you know. Right now he’s on a journey.”

“A... journey, you say?”

“Yeah. That’s a secret though. You won’t like what’ll happen next if you tattle.”

“I shall not speak a word of it.”

Even if you pried my mouth open I wouldn’t. But in that case I really wish he hadn’t told me to begin with. It was human nature to want to tell things that they were ordered not to tell.

“Who would have thought he would suddenly change classes from ‘Best Friend’ to ‘Traveller’.”

“Hahhh...”

You actually went on a journey, Kaburagi? What, are you searching for yourself or something?

“When might Kaburagi-sama be returning from this journey?”

“It’s because I don’t know that this is such a pain. I’m calling him again today to try and talk him out of this.”

“Hah... Well then...”

“Anyhow, it’s a secret okay?” he said once more, putting his index finger over his mouth.

It was tough stuff, having a troublesome friend...

But a journey... Where did he even go. North, I bet. I could already see him with his coat lapels up, travelling through a snowstorm or something.

Thinking about it, it was almost time for winter break. I wondered if Kaburagi would be back for the New Year.

Also I wondered if this would be the year I’d become a full-fledged member of the Handicrafts Club.

With my needle-felting project in my bag, I hurried to the clubroom.

Apparently it was traditional for all the members to go have tea on the last day of club activities. I wasn’t invited though.

It was the last day of school this year. I had no real plans for anything, so I was leaving the school building with my friends to go home. That was when I came across a

familiar face.

Katsuragi.

The one who called me a screw-head. I had thought of the perfect revenge.

“Katsuragi-kun, there’s something you need to know.”

“What!”

“Do you know about the Sha Wujing of the morning?”

“Hah?”

“Long ago there was a terrible battle. Soldiers died by the number, and in horrifying ways too. So horrifying that the soldiers weren’t able to pass on. Their spirits decided to find the enemies that put them through that suffering, and now they wander every night, blood running from severed necks, shallow whistling from the cuts in their necks, all the while moaning “Shaa Wujing of the Mooorningg~”. And you see, “Sha Wujing of the Morning” was part of a code used to find out if somebody was an ally or the enemy. And the people who couldn’t answer the code were their enemies, and they would end up haunting them to death. And the thing is, once you’ve heard the story they’re sure to visit you that night. They stand at your bedside and if you don’t tell them the meaning of the code, they’ll kill you and drag you into the next world.”

“Haaaaah!? What the fuck is that!?”

I held out my arms floppily like a zombie, and began walking closer to Birdbrain.

“...The truth is they came to my house too, the Bloodstained Warriors. Thankfully I was safe because I figured out the password. You’re a smart boy, Katsuragi-kun, so I’m sure you’ll realise it in no time. When the half-decapitated warriors visit you tonight, make

sure you tell them. Also if you tell anybody else about this story they'll visit them too, so be careful okay?"

"O-, Oi!"

"Well then, that's all I wanted to say. Gokigen'yoh, Katsuragi-kun."

I turned around to leave.

"Wait! Screw-head! Come back and tell me!"

"I have no reason to tell a person who can't even use people's names correctly."

"Ugh-! ...Kisshouin."

"Senpai."

"...Kisshouin ...senpai ...tell me."

"I'm soooooorry~ If I tell somebody else the password then I'll be *killed*~ Do your best, okay~? Well then, for real this time, gokigen'yoh~ Have a good year~"

"You-! Wait! Oiii!"

My steps felt light as I left him behind.

I did it. That guy is an idiot so I doubt he'd figure it out soon. And he's an idiot so I bet he'd actually be scared. KEEEEKEKEKEKEKEKE! Serves you riiight! This is revenge for 'screw head'!

"...Um, Reika-sama. Just now, I heard that story as well..."

“Eh-, ah, that was complete lies~”

“It was a lie?”

“Yes, it was a lie. The soldiers had their throats cut and they were wheezing air from the wounds. In that case, how could they speak properly? Also the real password was actually ‘asa no sangogyou’. Well, not that it matters either way, since it was all just a lie anyhow.”

“ ... ”

Katsuragi as his face turned white as a sheet! Of course he’d believe it, he was a chuunibyou after all. Not that he could help it, he was an idiot after all!

Ahh, so happy. This year’s grudges are water under the bridge next year, they say.

CHAPTER 102



Kurikinton is candied chestnuts mixed in mashed sweet potatoes and candied chestnut syrup and is considered a traditional New Year food.

I was eating kurinkinton on New Years when I came to a shocking realisation.

Could it be that Kaburagi had been rejected by Yurie-sama!?

What if those test scores were the result of being in such shock that he couldn't concentrate. And then because of that he went on a journey to deal with the heartbreak.

Whoa, I'm so sharp this year...

But that wasn't what happened in Kimidol. I mean, he never went on any journey in the manga, and he should have been rejected after he was a little closer with Wakaba-chan.

Hmmm... Maybe the story had changed from the manga a little bit. To begin with, the main perpetrator of the bullying campaign was sitting here eating.

And it felt like the personalities of the main characters were a little different too. The Emperor who I fangirled over in the manga would absolutely never have had such a deviant-level of passion towards cavalry battles, nor was he some weirdo athletics carnival maniac who would criticise others over their lack of animal noses for the costume race. He was cooler. And Enjou had been the kind and gentle person who watched over Emperor and Wakaba-chan, not this scheming bastard. To begin with,

just failing to have honey-brown hair was a departure from the manga. Also... it kind of felt like Wakaba-chan had become... little bit of a dope...

Why was it, I wondered. Why had all the main characters turn into such unfortunate alternates of their manga selves.

And on the other hand, people who hadn't appeared at all in the manga like Oniisama and Imari-sama and Tomoe-senpai were so damned cool! If *they* had been in Kimidol they would have been so popular too! Especially Tomoe-senpai. He's cool like the manga Emperor had been.

With all these other irregularities, would things progress differently than the manga? Well, as long as my own life was nice and quiet I didn't particularly care though.

Anyhow, I saved away all of the New Years money that I got. Although the one that I got from Oniisama was going to be enshrined next to my bed.

Kaburagi wasn't there at the Term 3 opening ceremony. Was he still on his journey? Even the middle schoolers were talking about his absence by now. It was astounding how one student truanting could have such an effect.

When I went to the salon, Enjou was there for the first time in a while. He was surrounded by people asking about Kaburagi.

"Masaya caught a cold during the New Year, so he's been resting. He should be back at school in a few days."

A cold? Had he finally returned from dealing with heartbreak? No, no, it's not like I knew for sure that he had been rejected. He could have been purely soul searching. Not that I personally held much stock in going on a journey to do so...

When Enjou spotted me, he excused himself and came over.

"Happy New Year, Kisshouin-san."

“Happy New Year, Enjou-sama.”

Enjou led me to somewhere there were less people and then handed me some kind of sack.

“Here, this is for you. Technically a souvenir from when I went here and there to fetch Masaya. Actually your hush money.”

Eh... This is kind of scary.

“...I, thank you for the consideration.”

And so with a smile, Enjou handed over the most unwanted gift.

So Enjou actually went out to get Kaburagi. And by ‘here and there’, that means he had to go to a lot of different places? Even during the busy New Year, he was still so serious about his friendships. Whatever else, he was actually pretty good at looking after others.

“You mentioned that Kaburagi-sama was down with a cold?”

“Yeah. He’s at home resting right now, actually. He went somewhere awfully cold, you see. But I guess it’s true what they say about sickness beginning with the heart. He was really weakened.”

“I see...”

Somewhere awfully cold?

Sickness beginning with the heart?

Then he really *did* go on a heartbreak journey!?

If he was somewhere cold, then I suppose it must have been northern Europe or Russia maybe. Oh, but wouldn't it be pretty bad to have Emperor Napoleon travel to Russia?

But imagining Kaburagi travelling the Siberian Tundra was kind of funny in a way. I pictured him discovering a mammoth. Uppftppftt.

"But he's not feverish so he'll be fine in no time. Once Masaya's back, I'll leave things to you."

"...Huhu?"

I had no idea what he was on about, so I just laughed to avoid the subject.

When I got home, I opened up Enjou's souvenir bag.

"Toujinbou Cookies"



Toujinbou is a well-known place in Japan to commit suicide. According to statistics, as many as 25 people commit suicide by jumping off the 70-foot-high cliffs annually.

“Kegon Falls Shortbread”



The Kegon Falls are infamous for suicides, especially among Japanese youth.

“Sea of Trees Manjuu”



Aokigahara, also known as the Suicide Forest or Sea of Trees borders Mt. Fuji. Statistics vary, but there were around up to 105 documented suicides a year.

I’m sorry for laughing at you, Kaburagi...

Who would have thought that you’d try and go even further in your journey...

Kaburagiii... Come back!!

But to think the journey taken by the esteemed scion of the Kaburagi not even failed to leave Japan, but failed to even leave our Honshu island. It was a little surprising.

A few days later, for the first time in about a month, Kaburagi showed up. He looked exhausted.

His skin looked dull, and his eyes were dead. Uwahh... This settles it...

He was difficult to approach, but in a totally different way now. Nobody was sure what to do. I pretended I didn't see him.

Most people thought he was like that because he had just fought off an illness, but that was absolutely wrong. Also some of the girls were talking about how his exhausted self was dreamy as well.

I was depressed too when my love for Tomoe-senpai didn't work out, but even I wasn't that bad. A lot of it probably came down to how unlike my crush of a few months, his was over ten years.

Sometimes it was a bit painful to see normally energetic people weak, wasn't it. Kaburagi, it's time for a new love, damnit! You've got a destined love named Wakaba-chan right here!

Speaking of Wakaba-chan, she was still couldn't hide her happiness at the results of that last exam. Her scholarship was relying on it after all.

While the whole school was worrying about Kaburagi, Wakaba-chan didn't seem to care at all. I suppose sometimes she did look a bit confused about the mood though. Since they weren't in contact, he wouldn't vent on her. To begin with, he didn't seem to have the energy to do that.

Maihama-san came to pick Kaburagi up. Normally he would have totally ignored her, but this time he didn't resist as she took his arm and brought him into the care.

Plenty of people had seen Maihama-san during the school festival, so there was a huge fuss when they saw the two going home together.

"Who *is* that girl!?"

"Maihama Ema from Yurinomiya! Apparently because she's close to Yurie-sama she's been clinging to Kaburagi-sama!"

"How could Kaburagi-sama go home with any girl other than Yurie-sama!"

Uwaa, uwaah, it's pandemonium.

Everyone was making faces like ogres!

Even the girls in my group were narrowing their eyes dangerously in the direction of the departed car. Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan were spouting curses.

Kaburagi, are you really okay...? Speaking of which, where on earth was Enjou?

I looked around but he was simply staring severely in that direction as well.

All of this was making me kind of scared, so I pretended not to notice and quietly slipped away.

That night, Aira-sama sent me a text saying that she wanted to meet and talk.

My stomach was hurting again for the first time in a while.

CHAPTER 103

Bara (薔薇, “rose”), also known by the wasei-eigo construction “Men’s Love” (ML メンズラブ, “menzu rabu”), is a Japanese technical term for a genre of art and fictional media that focuses on male same-sex love usually created by gay men for a gay audience.



Mount Hiei is a mountain to the north-east of Kyoto, lying on the border between the Kyoto and Shiga Prefectures, Japan.

Enryaku-ji is a Tendai monastery located atop Mount Hiei by the monk Saichou in 788.



Mount Kouya is the name of mountains in Wakayama Prefecture to the south of Osaka. First settled in 819 by the monk Kuukai, Mt. Kouya is primarily known as the world headquarters of the Kouyasan Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism.

Saigyō was the name of a monk said to have created an artificial human. Recalling tales of lonely ogres gathering human bones to create a person, Saigyō was said to have used the secret necromantic séance teachings of the Tokudaiji noble house to create a human from human bone remains.

I met Aira-sama in a café the next Sunday in the early afternoon.

“Sorry for making you come out here, Reika-chan.”

“There is nothing to apologise for. Being able to meet with you is a pleasure.”

I ordered a latte. This café did latte art, so I asked for a sheep.

“Cute sheep. Speaking of which, you wore sheep ears during the school festival didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

The reception that my sheep butler costume received was surprisingly good, so I had become a little fond of sheep since. Hmm, it was a bit of a shame to ruin this by drinking it.

While I was appreciating my latte art, Aira-sama began speaking hesitantly.

“So you see, I’m sure you’ve already guessed why I’ve called you out today. It’s about Yurie and Masaya.”

Here it was... I *had* pretty much guessed it. I took a gentle sip to avoid ruining the sheep. It was delicious.

“You’ve noticed too that Masaya’s been acting strangely, right?”

“...Yes.”

After seeing *that* it would be stranger if anybody *failed* to notice. He was like an empty cicada shell of himself. Even if I had somehow missed that, Enjou had already told me about how he went on a journey, and then handed over those unlucky souvenirs.

“You see, Yurie has finally given him her decision.”

“Aahh...”

I thought so...

“Yurie cares about Masaya a great deal as well, but it’s always been the love for a younger brother. That’s why she thought it was about time to make things clear. I mean, the two of us are already twenty. In a sense you could say she was taking responsibility.”

“Hahhh...”

It was more or less the same in Kimidol. *‘I can’t see you as anything other than a brother, so I can’t answer your feelings’* or something. Kaburagi had still replied “No! I won’t give up!” and was pretty persistent about it. In the very end though, Yurie-sama wouldn’t take back her words, for both their sakes.

“It happened a little while after the school festival. Truthfully though, Yurie’s been trying put some distance between them since Masaya entered high school. She’s been trying to create chances for him to notice other girls as well. Remember the girl she brought with her to the school festival?”

“Ah, Maihama Ema-san.”

“Right. The two of them studied under the same tea master and go back quite a while.

Ema-san looks up to Yurie and adores Masaya too, and has been to his house a few times with Yurie. Since Yurie dotes on her, Masaya can't flat-out reject her either..."

"I see..."

"Originally we had planned to come with just Yurie and I but Ema-san came along to the school festival as well. Masaya was really unhappy about that. He had planned to walk around with Yurie but then Ema-san was stuck to him the whole time instead. And then later when he went to Yurie's house to visit, Ema-san was there *again*... Eventually the stress built up and he demanded that Yurie tell him what was going on."

"..."

"And so Yurie told him that she could only see him as a little brother and asked him to give up on her. It went something along the lines of telling him that her feelings wouldn't change no matter how much he pined after her. She thought it was a good opportunity to set things straight."

"So the exam results..."

"...Yeah. Masaya of all people dropped ranks, didn't he. I heard about it later. Yurie was worried too. What's worse is that after that a young man we met in the UK came to Japan on business. Yurie and I had gone to welcome him, but then Masaya saw. He assumed that Yurie had said all that because she had found a boyfriend and flipped out. The guy took a lot of care of us while we were overseas so Yurie was furious at how rude Masaya had been. So she went and said, 'Who I date is none of your business, Masaya! I don't want to see you anymore!' Of course, they weren't actually dating, you see."

"I see..."

So that's why he went on his journey.

But wow, Kaburagi hadn't matured since primary school at all. It was the same mistake all over again.

"Did Shuusuke tell you that Masaya went missing? We had a decent idea of where he had gone, but Yurie was white as a sheet what with the destination and all. She came crying to me that she hadn't expected him to take it that badly and asked me what to do. Shuusuke spent each day talking Masaya down until he knew enough to go pick Masaya up... Ojisama and Obasama were obviously horrified and wanted to know what happened to their son, so it was chaos over there too. Yurie's been depressed and guilty towards them and told me that she couldn't face them. It's been a horrible start to the year."

To think that while I was nomming on red bean soup and New Year's mochi broth, these guys were going through something like *this*...

"Anyhow, we managed to somehow bring Masaya home, and you remember his cold? Because of that he had to call off the rest of his journey, but he's been completely listless, like a different person. We've all been really worried."

"I see."

This went into a lot more detail than I expected... I wasn't liking where this was going.

"Are you certain that you should be telling an outsider like me about all this?"

I made sure to stress 'outsider'. Not that I thought it would save me at this point...

Aira-sama leant forward and continued.

“You see, I was hoping you could lend your help in getting Masaya back on his feet. Please, Reika-chan.”

“I question what aid I could possibly lend... The two of us are not particularly close, after all. What if you asked Maihama-san, or...?”

Aira-sama shook her head and took my hands into hers.

“That’s not true. I know you can do it, Reika-chan! Back at the school festival the only time Masaya stopped looking moody was when he saw you in your butler outfit. He said something about you not listening to what he said at all. Masaya rarely shows any interest in any girl that isn’t Yurie, you know!”

He wasn’t interested in me so much as in pointing out why my costume was bad, though.

“And I feel a little bad for saying this, but I don’t think Ema-san could move Masaya’s heart,” she declared.

“Ah, but~”

“Please, Reika-chan! Yurie’s been feeling responsible for it all and has been in really bad shape. Couldn’t you give Masaya some advice or something to cheer him up? Please?”

Uuuu... It was really hard to refuse Aira-sama like this...

But I didn’t wanna do itttt. I had no idea how to cheer somebody like that up, and to begin with I didn’t want to get involved.

“Reika-chan.”

“Uu... I understand.”

——I had taken the first step into a bottomless bog.

Advice... What kind of advice was I even supposed to give?

Ways to get over heartbreak? This was actually the best chance for him to start a new love with Wakaba-chan, but there were no signs of that at all.

What if I tried spurring Wakaba-chan on? No, no, it wouldn't do to cross any more dangerous bridges than I already had.

Oh, how about...

“Umm, Kaburagi-sama?”

I called out to Kaburagi while he was sitting blankly in the salon. Sitting next to him, Enjou smiled.

“Why not leave behind the troubles of the material world and join one of the strictly male convents in Europe? How about it? The World of Roses awaits you.”

“...”

“Kisshouin-san, could I have a word with you?” smiled Enjou as he grabbed my arm and pulled me away.

“Why exactly does Masaya have to get a tonsure and join a convent? And in Europe too.”

“As a scion of the Kaburagi house, I believed it suitable for him to go to the true home of convents.”

“Vetoed.”

Wow, *somebody's* being picky.

I returned to Kaburagi for another try.

“Kaburagi-sama, Japan has Mount Hiei and Mount Kouya. How about it? Throw away your worldly ties, shave your head, and enter the service of the Buddha. I think the shaved-look would suit you very well, Kaburagi-sama. You might even get a chance to meet Saigyou's homunculus.”

“ ... ”

“Kisshouin-san, could I have a word with you?” said Enjou, grabbing my arm a little stronger than last time and pulling me away. “Do you think you could maybe step away from advice that involves running away from home? Kisshouin-san, you're really just trying to seal something troublesome far away, aren't you?”

“Goodness, no! I thought that it might be best if he had a change of pace. My intentions are entirely pure.”

“Liar.”

How mean. Doubting people's sincerity like that is just proof that his own heart is twisted.

“A tonsure... Monkhood...” we heard Kaburagi mutter.

“You see? Kaburagi-sama seems to be interested as well. Kaburagi-sama, I personally recommend the tonsure!”

“Kisshouin-san, that’s enough out of you.”

Despite the efforts I used to come up with this advice, Enjou shooed me away. I thought it was pretty good advice too.

I only wanted the best for him.

‘We’ll do something about Masaya on our own. Thanks.’

said a message from Aira-sama.

Goodness, is that so? I apologise for not being able to help.

CHAPTER 104

It was just starting to become cold when the snow began.

I had been excitedly hoping that with all this snow school would be cancelled, but alas, no such announcement came and so I had no choice but prepare to head out.

It was probably quite hard on those who were commuting by train but I was fine and dandy in my car.

Honestly, there wasn't anything more dangerous than wearing loafers on a snowy day. And it got into your shoes too. Times were hard back in my old life as a commoner. Only primary schoolers would feel happy about snow.

As I was watching from the comfort of my car, I saw a number of people slip on the snow. It sure was dangerous.

Most students of Suiran were driven, but a few of the ones that lived close-by would walk with friends. I caught a few of them here and there. The loafers were sinking into the snow so they were having a hard time of walking. Despite that, there was a student walking properly through it.

It was Wakaba-chan. Wakaba-chan was wearing rain boots.

Not the plain ones that fishmongers wore. On the side of her boots were flower patterns.

Still, I could respect that she chose practicality over fashion. Just what you'd expect from her.

Wakaba-chan's nose was all red, and her face was buried in her muffler.

Mufflers...

I had the sudden urge to knit a muffler.

I was almost always dropped off by car so there really wasn't much reason to own one. Except as fashion, that is.

I immediately headed to the Handicrafts Club with some yarn.

Knitting was popular here in winter, so plenty of them were sitting around with knitting needles.

It sure looked fun. I wasn't very skilled so my knitting was loose or crooked in places.

"Knitting, Reika-sama? Could it be that you had a tangle again?" asked the senpai who became the new Club President.

"No, I was simply thinking of trying a muffler this time."

"My, a muffler. For your own use? Or were you thinking of giving it as a present to somebody?"

"I had not truly considered it... I just wanted to make one."

I'm pretty sure even Oniisama or Otousama would be bothered if I foisted one of my mufflers onto them. I had bought some of the softest wool, so I planned to just unravel it at home later.

"Ummm... Speaking of which, Reika-sama, I need to speak to you about something."

"What might the matter be?"

The Club President seemed like she had a hard time finding the words. I had a bad feeling. Everybody else seemed to be glancing this way too. The feeling was getting worse and worse.

“You’ve really been coming to our club a lot, Reika-sama...”

“Yes...”

Uohhnn, was it finally time? After a year of nonchalantly coming here, it was about time that somebody asked what the heck I was doing here. Despite her gentle face, it seemed the Club President could deal with conflict.

What was I going to do? Huh. What if when she evicted me, I just pretended not to hear...

“Reika-sama, would you like to join our club?”

“Eh!?”

The President gently handed me an application form.

“Last year on the last day of club activities, all of us discussed it. You seem to love handicrafts, and you helped us with the bouquet for the school festival, didn’t you? So we wondered why not have you join us officially.”

They were talking about *that* during that tea party I wasn’t invited to!?

“May I truly join the club?”

“Yes, of course.”

“...But did you not find me a bother at first?”

“No, not at all!”

The President’s eyes were swimming. I knew it...

“Um, we would be happy too if you joined us, Reika-sama,” one of the members spoke up.

Really? I looked around, only to find the other members nodding with smiles.

After a whole year, I finally got in! I could get rid of the ‘Provisional’ now!

I gripped the application form tightly in my hands.

“I shall join the Handicrafts Club!” I declared.

Everybody clapped in welcome.

Happy! So happy!

My mood suddenly sky-rocketed. So happy I was that before I knew it I had stood up and placed my hands on my hips.

“Then as an official member, I shall spare no effort in working for the club. My first act will be to negotiate with the student council, claim the budget that we deserve, and guarantee a larger and better club room for us!”

“Eh-, nobody really asked for that...”

“Leave it to me, everybody! The most conspicuous location shall be allocated to *us*, next school festival!”

“Reika-sama, we’re happy the way we are!”

“And being somewhere too eye-catching is a little...”

“Please, Reika-sama! Please quit this...”

My new club members stopped me in a panic.

Oops. The happiness almost ran to my head. The new Club President was already half pulling at my application form. What are you doing? I won’t return it now. I’ll bring it back tomorrow with the stamps on it. Accept it without crushing it, okay?

And to that last girl, you weren’t telling me to quit this club, were you? I’m not leaving this place until graduation.

Today, Kisshouin Reika became a full member of the Handicrafts Club. Uhohooi!

I texted Aoi-chan and Sakura-chan about my acceptance into the Handicrafts Club.

‘I’m so happy for you! I knew they would see what a good person you were!’ came Aoi-chan’s heart-warming reply.

‘After silently pressuring them for so long, no wonder they folded. As always, stubborn persistence will win the day,’ said Sakura-chan. Sharp-tongued as always.

After that, Sakura-chan mailed me about Maihama-san’s situation. Apparently at Yurinomiya she was all but boasting that she was Emperor’s girlfriend. She told

everybody about how Emperor's mother, and the woman he idolised as an older sister had already approved of her.

“Uheeh~”

Maihama-san sure was running her mouth, just because she went to a different school. Had this happened at Suiran she would have been lynched in a day.

Even though she had only come to pick him up from Suiran the one time, according to Sakura-chan's information, she had gone to the Kaburagi house a number of times.

Anyhow, maybe thanks to Enjou's encouragement, Kaburagi was slowly getting better. The damage still seemed quite deep though because he hadn't taken care of Maihama-san yet.

Being perfectly honest, I think the best way to get him his energy back would be to hold a snowball tournament.

It wouldn't be surprising, considering the way he treated cavalry battles. I could already see him gathering an army of follows, and shouting “Left and right wings, flank them!”

I doubted that the school would organise a snowball tournament just for his sake though.

Going back to Maihama-san though, she was kind of like a mini Kimidol-Kisshouin Reika, wasn't she.

After officially joining the club I wanted to be a model member, so I made sure to come each day and furiously knitted away. Thanks to that my scarf had become oddly long and was kind of a weird shape, so I converted it into a lap blanket instead.

Once it was done though it wasn't very good, so I gave it to Otousama.

Of course, the tanuki got ahead of himself, and said “Reika is such a daddy’s girl,”
pissing me off.

And then I heard from his secretary Sasajima-san about how he was running around
showing the thing off, so right now I was in the middle of deep, profound regret...

CHAPTER 105

Wakaba-chan wearing rain boots that day turned into a bit of a fiasco. Some people were claiming that it was affecting Suiran's image and dignity.

I thought it was kicking up a huge fuss about nothing but a lot of people were quite proud to go to Suiran and it looked like they were finding her actions hard to accept. While I had been joining the Handicrafts Club, apparently the President of the Pivoine herself was busy giving Wakaba-chan a severe verbal lashing. Because the President had her eye on Wakaba-chan, yet more students were avoiding her.

Wakaba-chan simply gave an earnest apology and swore not to wear them to school again.

I wondered where Kaburagi had been during a time like this, but it turns out he was sitting around depressed and reading Heine. Did that make Yurie his Amalie? So troublesome...

On the other hand, if Kaburagi was this subdued until graduation, wouldn't that mean a relaxing high school life for me? Was it actually *better* for me if he didn't get back on his feet?!

Since Kaburagi was done with his journeys, even Enjou was leaving him be.

Somehow this was shaping up to be a fantastic year.

It was close to Valentine's, so when I arrived at cram school Moriyama-san and Sakaki-san were discussing chocolates. The self-proclaimed boy-ish Moriyama-san would

apparently be hand-making chocolates.

“Kisshouin-san, are you planning on giving *him* chocolates?”

Oh yeah. I forgot I had that kind of background story. It's not like I saw Imari-sama all that often, and it would have been weird to go out of my way just for that, so I hadn't actually ever done it.

“Not as such. I only ever give chocolates to family members.”

“Ehhhhhh? You have to be more pro-active about these things.”

“I simply appreciate him in secret so I would not want him to realise.”

“Hmmmmm.”

That was when the three guys of the group came barging in.

“What's this about Valentine's!?”

“Since you won't get any chocolates anyhow, *I'll* give you some,” Moriyama-san said with her best impression of casual. Shocker.

Apparently the gazes that the boys got from their family physically pained them so they begged us for quantity. That's how it was decided that they would get one from each of us. For some reason me included. I hadn't ever given anybody courtesy Valentine's chocolates though.

“I bet Kisshouin-san's courtesy chocolates are going to be super high class!”

Moriyama-san's eyes turned sharp at his comment. Scary. Since the other two girls were just giving normal chocolates, I decided that Umewaka-kun would get special dog chocolate for Beatrice. At least I wouldn't be giving him chocolates now.

Aahh~ A Valentines without a crush to give a proper Valentine's chocolate to was *boringg*.

At school my friends discussed giving chocolates to Kaburagi and Enjou so it was lively every day. Since it didn't cost me anything, I gave them some advice.

"Kaburagi-sama is fussy about calling it chocolat instead."

Anyhow, since this Valentine's talk didn't have much to do with me, I was left feeling a little bored. That's why I ended up wandering the school for a while when I suddenly bumped into Tomoe-senpai coming out of the staff room.

"Tomoe-senpai!"

"Oh! Kisshouin-san."

I trotted over to him. Chances like these were precious now that we were so close to his graduation.

"Tomoe-senpai, I heard that you made it into the university you wanted. Congratulations!"

"Thanks," he said, and flashed an honest smile. Uhuhu, wasn't this a feast for the eyes.

"I had wanted to give you something to congratulate you, but..."

“Congratulate me? That’s fine. Just hearing that is enough. Thank you.”

Mmmn. I guess. I suppose it would be a bit heavy to receive a graduation gift from somebody who was just an underclassman... But there wasn’t much time left until graduation, so I wanted to do something.

I told him as much, and he suggested,

“How about Valentine’s chocolate for my present then?”

“Eh!?”

Valentine’s chocolate for Tomoe-senpai!?

Was I dreaming!? I knew I was lucky this year!

I swore that no matter what else happened, I would give him one! Thus, I rushed towards the 3rd year classrooms.

I was of course overjoyed at the chance to do this, but first I needed permission from Kasumi-sama, his girlfriend.

I told her what happened and asked her what she thought, but she gladly gave me permission.

“Senju loves sweets, so choose something delicious, okay?”

Leave it to me!

I began butting into my friends’ conversations, asked Sakura-chan for help, and researched various sources as to exactly what chocolate to pick. I even personally taste-tested them all.

Even romantic delusions like this were fun. I don’t think I had ever chosen a chocolate

so seriously. Was this how fans felt when they picked out chocolates to give to idols?

On the day of Valentine's, I handed over matching chocolates to Kasumi-sama and Tomoe-senpai. In the message card I wrote 'S & K'. In my capacity as the Village Chief of Forever Alone Village, I bless you, O happy couple! Out of all the chocolates I gobbled down, this was the yummiest one, you know!

"Thank you!" he smiled. Kyuun!

I know it isn't official yet, but congratulations on getting the offer you wanted, Tomoe-senpai. A consumable as a gift really was the best choice.

"I never expected that I would get some too. Thank you, Reika-sama."

Kasumi-sama happily accepted her bundle as well. They're delicious, so make sure to eat them, okay?

"By the way, Kasumi-sama, what kind of chocolate did *you* give him?"

"Oh, I made a cake and..."

Ohh! For a boyfriend it really did have to be hand-made!

How nice. I'm so envious. I wonder if I'll ever get to give somebody a hand-made chocolate.

Kasumi-sama and I spoke about Valentine's for a while.

"Aren't you going to give chocolates to the person you like?" she asked, so I replied,

"Nobody like that exists at the moment. If there was somebody else like Tomoe-senpai

it would be a different story, however,” so she happily replied,

“My! There’s nobody else like Senju, you know? Uhuhu.”

Urggh! Next year! Next year for sure I’ll find somebody!

All that was left today was to go home and make chocolates for Oniisama and Otousama. That’s why I quickly said goodbye to my friends and left the school building. As I was heading towards the gates, though, I saw a huge crowd gathered there.

Curious, I went to have a look only to find Maihama-san who had come all the way to Suiran just to give Kaburagi her chocolates. Her curls casual as usual, Maihama-san’s mouth was curved upwards proudly.

“Masaya-sama, the Valentine’s chocolates I promised.”

“ .. ”

Ah! Weren’t those the same chocolates that I brought to the Kaburagi tea party! If you’re giving chocolates to somebody you love then put in the effort to make them yourself, damnit! And ‘chocolates’! She just said ‘chocolates’! Are you an idiot!

While the girls of Suiran were seething with hatred, Kaburagi just accepted them without much care.

The amount of chocolate that Kaburagi received was incredible, so he always had some of his family’s employees accept them. The chocolate from Maihama-san was dangling from his hand however, and the expressions of the girls were getting more and more dangerous.

While I was watching everything unfold next to my enraged friends, Maihama-san suddenly noticed me.

“My, Reika-san.”

Uwah, annoying.

“Gokigen’yoh, Maihama-san.”

“Masaya-sama and I are going home to eat my Valentine’s chocolates together.”

“I see.”

“His Okaasama invited me, after all. Are you going to his house too, Reika-san?”

“No.”

“Oh myy! Were you not invited, Reika-sama? Oh my, I’m *so* sorry. Were you expecting something?”

With those insults, my friends’ eyes now promised murder.

Although Maihama-san was acting like she was better than me, while she was busy looking down on me Kaburagi had gotten into his car by himself and was about to drive off. Oh. There he goes. Maihama-san had been left behind.

“Masaya-sama!?”

In a panic, she got into her own car to chase him down. Ridiculous.

“How dare that woman speak to you like that!?” growled Serika-chan holding one arm.

“Unforgiveable...! Reika-sama! Punish that upstart!” snarled Kikuno-chan with my other.

Now, now, don't be so angry. Didn't she just give us a hilarious show?

“She will never amount to much,” I said simply.

That seemed to calm my group down. Really though, you could tell as much by her curls. She was from another school too, so honestly I couldn't care less.

More important than her sad little sideshow was getting home in time to get the chocolates prepared. I probably wouldn't miss anything except my friends badmouthing her some more.

As I was finally leaving the school ground, I caught sight of Wakaba-chan. Wakaba-chan's pastime was baking sweets. I wonder if she had made anything for Valentine's.

This year I was making a simple chocolate cake.

First I mixed the ingredients I had prepared. This was a Reika-original recipe.

I wanted it to have a mature taste so I used less sugar for starters. Instead, I put in some liqueur. The subtle flavours of an adult.

To make the liqueur flavour a little more original, I secretly used multiple kinds. Hmm
hmm hmm~

Maybe it would be a good idea to submit the recipe to a cooking website. Oh! Then it would have been even better to have pictures of the process! What a shame! Oh well.
Next time...

The finished cake smelt of alcohol. Hm, this was okay, right?

I tried a bit. It was a little bitter...

Commoners wouldn't know, but high quality chocolate was actually kind of bitter.

Sweet chocolate tasted a bit cheaper.

Oniisama would be late coming home today, so in the end I gave Otousama his share first. The tanuki took a bit and then said stuff like,

“Ah, Otousama has a few health checks coming up and...”

Stop chewing already and swallow, you tanuki. This cake is filled with love from your daughter, you know.

As for Oniisama... I decided to cut him a smaller piece.

CHAPTER 106

It was finally here. The day of Tomoe-senpai's graduation.

As the Student Council President, naturally Tomoe-senpai was the one giving the address. Aahh. This would be the last time seeing Tomoe-senpai in his uniform. Goodbye, first love of mine. ...Just kidding. I just felt like being a little extravagant. First I congratulated the graduating Pivoine members as a fellow member. After that I made my way towards Tomoe-senpai. Around him was a huge crowd of other graduates. It was a little nerve-wracking.

"Congratulations on graduating, Tomoe-senpai!"

"Thanks, Kisshouin-san."

Uu, being so close was making me teary... It's going to be so *lonely*.

"Thanks for the chocolate the other day. Kasumi was overjoyed too."

"Yes!"

Ah, he just said Kasumi. Was that okay now?

I looked at him questioningly, and he smiled and nodded.

"Kasumi!"

Kasumi looked up with a start amidst her group of friends a distance away.

Seeing us, she walked over and then wrapped her arms around his shoulders and dropped her bombshell announcement.

“Everybody, we’re dating!”

As the former Student Council President and a member of the Pivoine, the news caused quite a stir.

Both the Student Council and the Pivoine had taken quite a shock.

I was moved though, and began clapping passionately. Uwaah, uwahh, *this* was the world of shoujo romance that I admiredd!

After graduating they didn’t really have much to do with the Pivoine or StuCo, right! Now they could walk happily through university with their hands held, right!

Influenced by my own clapping, other people began to follow. The applause grew louder and louder.

Tomoe-senpai smiled and waved, but Kasumi-sama had turned beet red. She seemed happy though. Aaahh! Kasumi-sama was crying! Oh no, now *I* was crying! I’m so happy for you, Kasumi-sama! You’ve had to hide it for so long. It must have hurt not being able to tell anyone.

The two of them slipped out of the crowd of shocked onlookers and came to where I was.

I gave them another clap of the hands.

“Thank you, Kisshouin-san.”

“Thank you, Reika-sama.”

“Cob-, cobgrajul-, leshonss!!”

Oh no, my nose was all stuffy from the crying.

I pulled out a handkerchief and stealthily wiped away the mucus along with my tears.

...Phew, I could finally breathe again.

“I am so glad for you, Kasumi-sama. You can finally love each other in public.”

“Thank you for everything, Reika-sama. I was really happy to have somebody like you to talk to.”

“Kasumi-samaaa~!”

And now I was crying again. And she was too, as we held hands. Oh, no, Kasumi-sama, this handkerchief has my snot on it...

“Kisshouin-san, I’ve always thought of you as a cute little sister as well. Thanks for everything. I hope you and Kasumi will stay close even after we’re gone.”

“Yes. I will always wish you two well.”

Tomoe-senpai rubbed me on the head. Uwaaan! Are you really okay with this good-for-nothing as a sisterrr!?

Oniisama, Imari-sama, and now Tomoe-senpai. I was blessed by wonderful Oniisamas all around!

After seeing them off, I realised that my tears had finally stopped.

It was a little embarrassing to have bawled like that, so I found an abandoned corner of the school building. I was finally alone. Pulling out some tissues, I blew my nose hard. Aahh, finally clear!

Hahhh. It was amazing how much better I felt now.

But Tomoe-senpai really was amazing. Even once would do, I wanted to experience

having somebody profess their love to me at graduation like that!

While bells were ringing in my head, somebody tapped me on the shoulder. Mn?

I turned around to find Kaburagi, standing there looking sorrowful.

What on earth was he doing *here*?

“Umm... is something the matter?”

It was a completely reasonable question.

Hand *still* on my shoulder, the sorrow on Kaburagi’s face deepened before he spoke.

“You’re amazing...”

“Eh?”

Amazing? At what?

“You’ve liked him all this time, right? The Student Council President.”

“Eh?”

“It must have been tough being told that you were like a little sister to him...”

“Eh? Ah, well...”

Kaburagi had a knowing look on his face as he slapped my shoulder a few times. That hurts, damnit. And stop misunderstanding things on your own. Seriously, what the heck was this guy saying.

“I’m in the same position as you, so I *know*. Being told that you’re a sister by the person

you love...!"

Kaburagi gripped my shoulder as he was overcome with emotion. Oww oww owwww!

"But you were amazing. You even smiled as you congratulated them. You did great."

This time it was my back that he was smacking. *That hurts, goddamnit!!* I'm not a sumo wrestler so stop hitting me already!

"Kaburagi-sama, might you be misunderstanding something?"

I casually put some distance between us and escaped the reach of his hand. But this time he grabbed me by both shoulders.

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone. Seeing you really encouraged me. The way you watched those two...! You're so amazing, Kisshouin! After watching you, I realised that I wanted to follow your lead and start facing forwards as well... So don't let yourself lose to a broken heart either!"

Grind, grind, grind. Oww, oww, owwww! He was pushing me into the ground!

My shoulders and my back hurt so much that I was starting to tear up, but then Kaburagi saw and started tearing up as well.

"If it gets to be too much, come talk to me. We both have to try our best... We can both get over this, I know it..."

Kaburagi turned away from me to hide his tears as he wiped his face.

"Don't do anything rash," he said, before leaving.

.....

What the hell was that?

And what do you mean rash? Did you think I was going to go on a journey as well? Um, I'm really not, okay? Toujinbou is freaking cold.

But wow, did Kaburagi have some strong ideas about things. Arbitrarily getting the wrong idea about Tomoe-senpai and I, too. That was ages ago. And it was a bit troublesome how because of the little sister comment he started thinking of us as comrades or something.

Sometimes I called people idiots in my head, but just now was the real deal.

My shoulders still hurt...

The next day I went to school with some analgesic strips on my shoulders. When I got to school, Kaburagi silently handed me a poem anthology.

'Eh-, I don't want this,' I thought and tried to hand it back, but he slapped me on the shoulder again so I nodded.

"Our feelings are in this book..."

What do you mean 'our'... I told you to stop lumping us together.

...Heine was the one who said 'love is always a kind of madness.'

You spent all that time reading poems, but you didn't learn a thing, did you Kaburagi.

"Also, Kisshouin, take care about your crying face. You look pretty horrible."

“...Hah?”

Apparently having said everything he wanted to, Kaburagi left for his own classroom with a satisfied expression.

Enjou, looking extremely pleased with himself, came over and spoke to me.

“Because of you, Masaya’s looking a lot better now. Thanks.”

...Haaah!?

Don’t feel better by making out other people as heartbroken rejects! And sorry for being ugly when I cry! Instead of bringing me a poem anthology, bring me some heat strips instead! Odourless ones!

Since people were watching I couldn’t exactly throw it away, and so I was left bringing it back with me.

“Kaburagi-sama gave Reika-sama a love poem anthologyy!” they squealed as I entered the classroom. God, could this get any worse...!?

“Giving a girl a poem anthology!? He’s so *sensitive* and *dreamy*!” some other girl pitched in. You think so? I’m not happy at all.

The thing was an anthology of poems read over two months by some sobbing reject. Just having it in my bag felt like it was harming my love fortunes. It was like a mass of bad luck!

When I got home and slammed my bag down, the head from a Japanese doll fell off.

CHAPTER 107

Around the time that I took the unlucky doll out for repairs, the finals came around.

A few days later when the results came out, this is what the ranking board looked like:

1. Enjou Shuusuke

2. Takamichi Wakaba

3. Mizusaki Arima

• • •

5. Kaburagi Masaya

He had been a walking corpse up until the exams happened. Why did he shoot to 5th place the moment he recovered?! I was at my best but I failed to get in *again*! What the heck was this!? The curse of the doll?!

The girls around Enjou and Kaburagi had been celebrating Enjou getting 1st place and Kaburagi's revival.

That was all when and good until I overheard,

“How cunning of her! She sneaked in between Enjou-sama and Mizusaki-kun!”

How was that her fault?

Meanwhile, Kaburagi was staring expressionlessly at the ranking board.

...I wondered if he wouldn't take that anthology back.

I had glanced through it at least, but the thing was tagged whenever there was a poem that he liked. So pushy... Maybe I could sneak it into his desk. If not, then what if I burnt it instead? The anthology felt like it was filled with his bad luck...

The 14th of March was White Day. While I was chatting with my group over lunch as usual, my phone received a message. The moment I saw the contents I sprinted towards the school gates. My sides immediately started hurting though so I slowed down.

"Kasumi-sama! Tomoe-senpai!"

I waved at the pair standing by the gates.

"It's been about two weeks, hasn't it, Kisshouin-san."

"Gokigen'yoh, Reika-sama."

"Yes! Gokigen'yoh, Kasumi-sama, Tomoe-senpai!"

Tomoe-senpai in casual clothes! He looked even more mature out of his school uniform! So cool!

"Sorry for bothering you during your lunch."

"Not at all! I am overjoyed to see the two of you again!"

"We're actually here today to give you this. Here, it's your White Day present," said

Tomoe-senpai.

What he handed me was a bag from a shop famous for their French marshmallows!



Yay! I loved these things!

In my past life I had enjoyed marshmallows for sure, but the expensive French guimauve marshmallows would melt away in your mouth in an instant, leaving behind a juicy fruit flavour.

What's more, the bag I was holding was pretty heavy too. There were definitely a lot in there. ...It was really nice.

"One more thing. This is from the both of us."

With that, Tomoe-senpai held out a shopping bag from a jeweller's.

"Eh!"

"We picked out something that we thought would look good on you, Kisshouin-san."

"Reika-sama, I would be happy if you liked it."

"May I open it and see?" I asked.

Tomoe-senpai and Kasumi-sama smiled in acquiescence so I didn't hold back. Inside was a beautiful flower necklace! And in the middle of it was a little aquamarine. Cute!

"May I truly accept something so wonderful for just a little bit of chocolate?"

"Of course! We picked the flower because it's *you*, Kisshouin-san. You'll look great wearing it."

So Tomoe-senpai's image of me was a flower!? Ah-, another phantom nosebleed...

"Thank you very much. I will treasure it forever!"

"Forever? Gee, I'm happy to hear that."

"The two of us are happy that you like it, Reika-sama."

As Kasumi-sama laughed gently with a hand over her mouth, I noticed a ring on it!

"Kasumi-sama, that ring is...?"

"Eh, ah. This is Senju's White Day present to me..." she said, turning bright red.

Kaaah! I'm so happy for you! What a happy couple!

But wow, I was so satisfied just getting this necklace.

Even though they were on holiday after graduating from school, they came all the way here just to give me these. I was really so happy.

Apparently the two of them were headed for a date after this. Tsk, and here I still had more classes. So lucky.

Since lunch break was about to end, I reluctantly bade them goodbye. They said they would come visit even after they entered university, so I was holding them to it.

Overjoyed, I practically skipped into the school building when I sensed an oddly strong gaze.

With my present in hand, I looked around only to find Kaburagi standing a little distance away.

He was staring riiight at me. Eh... What's with him?

He was staring at me so silently that I could almost hear the silence. I stepped backwards due to the discomfort.

"Ummm... Is something the matter?"

Staaaaaaaaare...

What the heck? Do you want something or what? I'm not a mind reader so just staring at me won't get you anywhere, okay? And it's scary too. Just say what you want already.

Kaburagi continued to stare in silence. I continued to slowly back away. To my misfortune, nobody was in front of the school building with us. Whaaaat the heeeck...

...Hm? Paying a bit more attention, I realised that he was actually staring at the present in my hand.

Could it be that he wanted to say something about me receiving this even though I was supposed to be a comrade in heartbreak? Did he think I was a traitor now? The

shopping bag even had the jeweller's brand on it...

Oh, or could it be that he wanted some reference before choosing White Day presents himself?

"Kaburagi-sama... Today is White Day... isn't it."

Kaburagi's eyes shot wide open.

Oh no! A landmine! I bet this guy didn't receive Valentine's chocolate from Yurie-sama this year! If he didn't get anything, then of course there was no reason to give anything back!

His gaze was condemning me for being the only one feeling good out of the two of us! Nooooo! This guy hadn't gotten better at all! His sickness was way too deep! Stop it! Don't get me sick too!

Nooo! Run away! I wanted to run away!

No choice!

I tore open the marshmallow bag. There it was.

A clear case with French marshmallows of different colours. Pink ones were raspberry, the light blue ones were lime, the orange ones were mango, the white ones peach...

I pulled a peach-flavoured one out of the case and then wrapped Kaburagi's hand over it as he stood there frozen.

Then I made a run for it!

Since time immemorial, the peach plant was said to have powerful anti-evil properties. According to the Kojiki, on his escape from Yomi, Izanagi was said to have thrown peaches to scatter the oni that followed him.

Which made this hallway the Yomotsuhirasaka! If I wanted to return safely to the real world, I couldn't look back!

Pass on peacefully, Kaburagi!

Today was the middle school graduation ceremony, so here I was, waiting to congratulate that uncute cousin of mine.



Not only did I have a bouquet of lollipop lilies for her, I had even gone out of the way to prepare an Oniisama.

Oniisama was really busy at work but after some begging I got him to slip away for a while. Ririna, be grateful to the compassionate Reika.

I handed the bouquet to Oniisama to give.

“Why don’t you just hand them over yourself?”

“Ririna will be happier receiving them from you, Oniisama.”

Ririna and her classmates began filing out of the building. The moment she spotted Oniisama she abandoned her friends and sprinted here full-speed.

“Taka-niisama! You came!”

“Congratulations, Ririna.”

“Lilies! Ririna’s flowers! Thank you, Taka-niisama!”

Ririna beamed blissfully as she received the bouquet from him. I supposed she could borrow him for today.

Instead, I began handing out smaller bouquets to her friends as I congratulated them. Thank goodness I prepared extras.

“Thank you, Reika-senpai!”

“To think Reika-senpai gave me flowers!”

“Thank you very much, Reika-senpai.”

Similar things could be heard from the rest of my little kouhai. Not Reika-sama, Reika-senpai. Of course I was the one who asked them to call me that, but still, uhuhuhu, it had such a *ring* to it. Was this how it felt to be respected and idolised?

“Thank you all so much for staying friends with that wilful girl. It must have been trouble. Ririna can be such a child.”

“Hey!” she butt in, “What the heck are you saying!?”

Ahh, stop being so louuud.

“Goodness, Ririna. So rowdy even at your graduation.”

“Whose fault is that!?”

“Hahh. So noisy. This is why I called you a child.”

“What did you say!?”

“Get along, you two. It’s graduation day.”

“But Taka-niisama!” she whined as she pulled on Oniisama’s cuff.

“What are you even here for, Reika-san? You haven’t congratulated me once.”

“My, I must have forgotten. Congratulations, Ririna.”

“Say that earlier.”

Sooo not cute.

Oniisama glanced at his watch. He came here while busy so I guess time was up.

“Sorry, Ririna. I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Ehh~”

“I greeted Ojisama and Obasama earlier, so I’m going to head off now. Give them my regards.”

“...Fiiine. It’s a shame but work is work. Thank you for coming today, Taka-niisama.”

“Yeah. Congratulations.”

“I think I shall leave as well,” I chimed in. “Congratulations once again, everybody. Please excuse me. Gokigen’yoh.”

I waved to everyone and was about to leave when Ririna called out to me.

“Reika-san.”

She was standing with her face buried in the flowers.

“...Thank you for the flowers...”

Hmph.

“You are 10 years too early for madonna lilies, you brazen girl. Lollipop lilies are more like it.”

“Shut up!”

Tired of dealing with my uncute younger cousin, I hurried to Oniisama’s side.

“Really, what on earth are you two doing?”

“Goodness, Oniisama. Do try to avoid lumping us together.”

Aaah, dealing with children had made me hungry. Since Oniisama was heading back to the company I thought about getting something to eat instead. Eating at home was fine, but eating out was an option too. I was feeling like Nagasaki champion.



Champon is made by frying pork, seafood and vegetables with lard; a soup made with chicken and pig bones is then added. Ramen noodles made especially for champon are added and then boiled.

That was when a lone boy appeared.

“Oi!”

It was the bird-brained Katsuragi boy.

“Long time no see, Katsuragi-kun. How are you feeling?”

“*You!* I figured out your trick! It was a lie!”

Trick? What was he on about? A lie?

“That password! Don’t think I didn’t solve it right away! And no bloodied soldiers ever came, either!”

Aah! *That!* Wow, considering his tone just now he must have really agonised over it. And *obviously* no ghost soldiers ever came. Huh? Could it be that he didn’t solve it that night and was actually frightened that they would come for him?

“Sounds like you got lucky. Anyhow, we’re leaving now, so bye.”

“Is that all you have to say!?”

“Goodness, did you want to hear another story?”

Katsuragi turned around and prepared to run, so I used the chance to urge Oniisama towards the parking lot.

Birdbrain was still cawing behind us.

Gosh, life was peaceful~ Spring was around the corner too~

“Is it alright to leave him, Reika?”

“Oh yes. For some reason I seem to be surrounded by buffoons...”

“I’m pretty sure that’s because...”

Oniisama gave me a complicated smile, and rubbed me on the head.

I hoped spring break would come soon~

CHAPTER 108

“Mmhuhuhuhu...!”

I looked at all the zeroes in my bank book. There was now enough to put me through four years of private university. If somehow I failed to make it into a public one, I could still get an education.

Hmmm... But expenses besides the tuition were still a worry. Would I be able to earn enough if I worked a part-time job while attending? If it was just myself it might not be too bad but paying for my family's food would be tough. That tanuki's in particular. Maybe I'd really have to study harder to earn a scholarship.

“I wonder if there isn't some get rich scheme out there somewhere...”

Maybe finding buried treasure or something.

I had a look around my house and our villa before but nothing ever came up. I had hoped to find at least one koban.

Hahhh... ‘Get rich quick’... ‘Easy money’... What wonderful words. To be honest I was more the type who preferred to wait around for good fortune.

Huh. Wasn't there a story about a dog finding treasure? Maybe I could take Beatrice with me into the mountains to look for some. Cocker spaniels were originally hunting dogs, weren't they? Maybe I'd try Mount Akagi first?

“This is just for you, Kisshouin-san.”

Umewaka-kun the dog lover gave me some sweets for White Day along with a self-made postcard of Bea-tan.

‘Thanks for the chocolates. They were really yummy!’ said the message from Bea-tan.

Moriyama-san’s reaction to the words ‘just for you’ was a little scary. You can have it if you want. The postcard.

It seems that Dog Lover-kun was working to support Beatrice. And apparently that was where he had made the money for his White Day presents to Beatrice. Clothing and a hair accessory.

To begin with, giving a White Day present meant that he got Valentines chocolate from Bea-tan, right? I joked as much to him, only to be told,

“Of course! Our love is mutual!”

with a smile. ...I see~

Sorry to Moriyama-san but it might have been better to give up on this guy... Apparently he already had a girlfriend.

I wonder if a dog spoilt so rotten would still have their instincts. Some of the photos I’d seen had featured Bea-tan frolicking in the waves at the beach but I’d never seen her muddy on a mountain. Maybe my dream of having buried coins dug up left and right would be a bit much for this sheltered girl.

Aahh... I suppose if I had time to daydream I might as well spend it thinking about ideas I could actually implement. A life of living on royalties... My life of living on unearned income...

I headed to my grab my notepad from my desk. Maybe I’d consider household goods first.

I met up with Sakura-chan during the spring break. It was getting warmer these days. I ordered a hot chocolate, thinking it might be my last for a while. Hot chocolate was

delicious.

“My. That’s cute necklace, Reika.”

“Uhuhu, isn’t it? I got this from Tomoe-senpai and Kasumi-sama for White Day.”

I held it up proudly so that she could see it better.

“By Tomoe-senpai, you mean that boy you used to like? Did you still like him?”

“No, no, I just think he’s really cool. Plus, Tomoe-senpai already has Kasumi-sama.”

I told her about what happened at graduation. Sakura-chan seemed to find it really dreamy too.

“I wonder if Takumi wouldn’t come for my graduation. Maybe he could make a dramatic statement at Yurinomiya.”

“Nah, something like that might be a bit much for him.”

“Hey, are you making fun of Takumi?”

“That’s not what I meant. Some people are just suited to different things.”

Speaking of which, her unrequited love had actually been going for a long time. It sounded fine put like that, but if you thought about it maybe this kind of stubborn love made her similar to Kaburagi. Since they were the same sort, maybe Kaburagi should have asked Sakura-chan for advice?

Oh, I know. Maybe I’d give her that anthology. I didn’t have it with me today so maybe I’d mail it to her house later.

“That’s some expression you’re wearing. What are you scheming, Reika?”

“Eh-, you’re imagining thingsss~”

“...I don’t know what you’re thinking but if you do something stupid I won’t forgive you.”

“Okay...”

Tsk.

“Speaking of which, on White Day Maihama Ema was kicking up a fuss about how she was going to get something from your Emperor.”

“Ehh! Kaburagi...-sama gave her a White Day present? Maihama-san?”

Kaburagi got a mountain of chocolate each year but I’d never heard of him giving anything back. Except to Yurie-sama of course.

Was he really treating Maihama-san as special? It was hard to imagine from his behaviour on Valentine’s though.

“Then the next day she started avoiding the topic. She wouldn’t tell us what she received, so it was probably a lie. She probably needed to show off to girls who actually got something from someone. There are actually a lot of girls there who believe that she’s close with the Emperor, but what’s the truth like?”

“Who knows...? I’m not all that close with Kaburagi-sama myself so I couldn’t say. I was surprised that she came all the way to Suiran to give him Valentine’s chocolate though.”

“Ahh, she *did* announce something about giving him chocolate and then spending time with him. Takumi said it almost caused a riot. Maihama Ema has always been acting like Emperor’s girlfriend but it’s gotten even worse this year. As ‘Emperor’s girlfriend’ she’s even been complaining to girls who gossip about how great he is.”

“Uwahh...”

Maihama-san was even more embarrassing than expected. Even Kisshouin Reika in the manga hadn’t spread terrifying lies about being his girlfriend.

Oh, I know. What if I gave the anthology to *her*? She’d treasure it if she knew it was Kaburagi’s beloved book. Since she wasn’t given anything on White Day, it could be a consolation prize from me. Now then, how would I send it over?

Since there was homework for the break I had Marin-sensei help. I had things to learn during the spring break too so it felt like I would be spending the whole time studying. Some of my friends were going out to have fun though... Maybe I’d get in touch with Aoi-chan?

While I was in my room, seeing how long I could keep a pencil on my lip for, my mother came smiling with an invitation in hand.

It was an invitation to a sakura-viewing party hosted by the Kaburagi family.

Most of the invitees to this party were adults so each year I had gotten out of going with my parents. This time it had specifically mentioned ‘Reika-san’ though, so it would be hard to get out of.

Ugehh~ I really didn’t wanna go. Obviously I didn’t want anything to do with them, and I didn’t even like viewing cherry blossoms at night. I mean, sure, sakura were pretty in the daytime, but at night they became a little scary.

Didn’t people used to say that there were corpses buried underneath them...?

Okaasama was already talking about picking out a furisode for me. A girl in a furisode, at night, with a cherry blossom tree. It was already starting to sound like some horror story...

While I was thinking about how to get out of it, I decided to fall ill.

First I tried a cold bath. It was so cold that I couldn't stay in for more than a minute. I thought my heart was going to stop. My lips were all purple and I couldn't stop the chattering. Cold! Dying! But maybe I'd catch a cold and get out of it all! I could already see a fever tomorrow.

Cold, cold, so damned cold. I got into bed shivering but when I woke up there wasn't even a sneeze.

I checked myself for any signs of illness, but I still had my appetite and health.

My body was surprisingly tough. Damn it...

Okay then. Maybe I'd try eating something rotten next...

CHAPTER 109

I bought a handmade bentou from a bentou store. It then sat around for two days in the warmth of my room.

I took the lid off and looked at the contents. The carrot was a bit sticky. ...This might really work.

Saying my prayers, I plopped it into my mouth and chewed. ...Urgh. The texture was horrible so I skipped the chewing and just swallowed.

Why had things come to this... It was disgusting. So disgusting that I wanted to hurl. Was it really necessary to go this far...?

Despite my misgivings I continued to eat the spoilt vegetables. The mixed fried rice was weirdly sticky too. This was actually so dreadful. Even the smell was off already. But a real woman was fearless! I stuffed my cheeks with the rice!

“!!!!!”

It was like the cells in my body were rejecting it! Enemy attack! Enemy attack! Everyone, *positions!*

A chemical stench and bitterness filled my mouth. I quickly spit it out but my gag reflex had already been flipped.

Even compared to the boiled vegetables, the destructive power of this ”fried rice” was something else. It was on the level of biological hazards. The inside of my mouth was still a mess. It was so bitter that I cried. And then another wave of nausea hit me.

I ran to the bathroom and threw up. There was red mixed in it.

Blood! I threw up blood! Threw up blood! I was going to die!

Lord, Lord in Heaven, I’m sorry. I won’t do anything stupid like eating rotten food again. I swear I’ll obediently go to the flower viewing, so please save me. Save me from

this nausea. Saaave meee...

How did it turn into something like this. It was the first time in my life that I had ever thrown up blood. What if I really died...!

I had another look through my teary gaze and I shivered.

It was some capsicum—

“...”

I threw up again.

Thank goodness it hadn't been blood... My stomach still felt like crap though.

I tottered out of the bathroom, and the maid looked at me in worry.

“Some stomach medicine and a hot bath please...”

Since the rotten food was still sitting in my room I asked to make sure nobody went inside. No matter how bad I felt, I had to dispose of that myself.

After taking the medicine I retreated to my room and hid the bentou in a garbage bag. Tomorrow I would secretly throw it away.

I spared one more glance at the fried rice and nodded grimly. Spoilt meat was not something to take lightly...

I was ill for a while. My family called over our doctor but I obviously couldn't tell him the truth.

“I have been feeling unwell recently. In the end I was ill.”

He diagnosed me with a possible stomach flu. Nope, I just deliberately gave myself stomach poisoning.

Thanks to the medicine and some good sleep, I woke up in the middle of the night feeling a little better. I was still a little dizzy, so maybe some food would help. I left my room for the kitchen when Oniisama came out of his room.

“What’s wrong, Reika? How are you feeling?”

“Oniisama? I am fine now. I thought it would be better to have something to eat, so I was on my way to the kitchen.”

“Food? Do we have anything for the ill?”

“If there is not then I will just make some myself.”

“...I’ll make the food.”

I wanted to refuse since I didn’t want to bother him this late at night, but Oniisama insisted. ‘You’re sick,’ he said.

Oniisama was so kind. Sorry for being an idiot sister who ate rotten food on purpose. I did as he said and got back in bed to wait for him. I wonder what he was making.

What he brought me was simple congee. There was dried plum in it. I took a bite. Yummy! This perfect level of saltiness! Aahh, the gentle sustenance spread inside me...

“I thought about putting spring onion in, but until you’re a little better I think just salt and dried plum is better.”

“It is delicious, Oniisama.”

I'd never even seen him cook but of course he was good at this too. Better than me, I think. I decided to try and make my own tomorrow. Was it good enough to just boil rice in some water? After that you just added salt, right?

"Everyone's worried about you, Reika. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"...Yes."

I was reflecting on it... I was still hungry though so I went for seconds. It was just salted congee so why was it so good.

In the end I finished all of it. It really was delicious.

Oniisama took care of the dishes. I felt bad about it but went back to sleep.

Aahh, so satisfied.

I'd hoped I could skip the flower viewing party but they found out that I was healthy again. And I suppose I *had* sworn to God. Whatever. At least I didn't have to wear the furisode, having just been ill and all. Instead, I was going with a ribboned flared dress in champagne gold.

Okaasama had preferred a dress in sakura pink, but I could already imagine hordes of people in that colour. I did at least paint my nails that colour, and I had a hair ornament with a sakura-motif too.

The flower viewing party was being hosted at the same hotel where I had the fasting course. It really did have a wonderful garden.

Since Oniisama was busy he wasn't coming today. How nice. If only I had a job.

The hall where the lighting complemented the sakura the best had been chosen to host the event. Specifically, there was a venerable weeping sakura tree of over fifty years

old. It was so venerable that it frightened me.



Weeping Cherry Blossom

Besides that there were a few standard yoshino cherry blossoms in full-bloom too. Gorgeous as you'd expect from a Kaburagi flower viewing party.

People were sipping wine and the like, while taking in the view. Some were drinking amazake too. I liked that stuff.

I was still a minor though, so I helped myself to a non-alcoholic cocktail. It was bubbly and pink, and there was a sakura petal in it. Pretty.

I gave it a sip, but the taste was hard to describe.

There were a lot of odd products that came from using flowers in food. Rose jam. Lavender ice cream. Actually, my first time having rose jam gave me quite a shock. I had tried it out because I thought it fit me as a Rococo, but it had quite the punch to it. The candied violets I had tried were the same.

I think maybe using flowers in food was less for the taste and more for the pretension.

Anyhow, I was wearing my well-practised smile as I greeted the other guests with my parents while I looked for anybody I knew. I hoped Sarara-sama would be here today~ A lot of younger guests had gathered around Kaburagi and Enjou. Some were even Pivoine members.

I told my parents I was going to look at the flowers and excused myself. I guess I wasn't *all* better if a crowd was making me this dizzy.

I looked around for somewhere to rest and found a seat where the sakura were still visible. With a new drink in hand, I took a seat. Somehow I wasn't feeling very hungry. Maybe I was nervous. My stomach felt weird.

"Why, if it isn't Reika-san."

Standing in front of me was Maihama-san in a sakura-pink dress. Heh. Simpleton. This place was filled with people wearing the same thing.

"Gokigen'yoh, Maihama-san."

"You look awfully lonely sitting over here by yourself, Reika-san," she smiled.

She didn't seem at all concerned for me. Geez, this girl was awfully intent on seeing me as a rival~

"I was simply resting."

"Hmmm~"

Her expression was nasty. She was probably plotting something. Now what was I going to do about it?

With good timing, Kaburagi had broken out of his ring of followers and was headed our way.

"Look, Maihama-san. Kaburagi-sama is coming."

"Eh!? Goodness, Masaya-sama!"

She rushed over towards him. He glanced at her once before he grunted in an incredible show of dismissal.

Oho...?

“Masaya-sama, thank you very much for inviting me today. I’m so happy that you called me here!”

“Thank my parents. I’m not the one who invited you.”

Despite his curtness, Maihama-san didn’t seem discouraged at all. Instead she grasped his arm.

“Masaya-sama, I hope you’ll invite me to your home again. Your Okaasama said I was always welcome.”

“If you wanna meet my mother then go ahead. It’s none of my business,” he said, slipping out of her hold.

Maihama-san tried reaching for him *again*. *Wow...*

“You came too, Kisshouin?” he asked after discovering me behind Maihama-san. It would have been fine if he hadn’t...

I suppose I had to at least greet him though. I stood up with some effort.

“Thank you very much for inviting me this evening.”

“Yeah.”

Maihama-san seemed sullen that he spoke to me.

“Masaya-sama, even though you went out of your way to invite her, Reika-san doesn’t seem to be having much fun, does she.”

An eyebrow rose on Kaburagi’s face. Maihama-san seemed to take this as a sign of victory because she shot me a smug smirk. Your evil small fry is showing.

Not that I had any interest in competing for Kaburagi’s affections, but if rumours spread about me backing down, my reputation was going to drop. Ah well.

“Speaking of which, Maihama-san, I heard that you received a wonderful present for White Day.”

“Eh-” she flinched.

So Sakura-chan was right.

“The mystery man is all *anybody* is talking about at Yurinomiya. How *nice*. Just who was it? Please do tell.”

“That’s...”

Her eyes swam. What are you going to do? I still have one other tidbit. Shall I share it with Kaburagi here?

While the two of us negotiated with our eyes, Kaburagi suddenly spoke up.

“Speaking of White Day, that marshmallow was good stuff. I suppose those were time-limited, huh.”

“Huh? Marshmallow?” asked Maihama-san.

Geh. Why did he have to speak up *now*?

Her gaze turned suspicious.

“Masaya-sama, what do you mean by marshmallow?”

His mouth opened and said something *else* unnecessary.

“I got a peach-flavoured marshmallow from Kisshouin on White Day.”

“From Reika-san!?” she exclaimed as her head snapped my way.

She was really glaring now. Almost like she was accusing me of stealing a march on her. That had just been for exorcism though.

“Masaya-sama didn’t give you a White Day present so you give him a marshmallow yourself? That sounds like a pushy hint *to me*.”

Guess she really didn’t get anything from him.

“Hint? To begin with I never gave him any chocolat. The marshmallow was just sharing a treat.”

“You’re lying! What do you mean you never gave him chocolate!”

“It is the truth. Is that not so, Kaburagi-sama?” I urged him.

“I don’t remember who I get chocolat from,” he said, off-handedly hurting her deeper. “But since I gave you that poem anthology I guess the marshmallow counts as your thanks.”

And so he casually dropped a bombshell.

“Poem anthology!?”

The jealousy and shock were mixing into something incredible on her face. C’mon, stop glaring.

Spotting Enjou again in the crowd, Kaburagi said ‘Cya’ and left us behind.

The atmosphere was tense and dangerous. Mostly from her side.

“Explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Explain what Masaya-sama meant by giving you a poem anthology!”

“Who knows. Perhaps he did it on a whim.”

Her glare was getting more and more intense.

“If you want to know so badly, how about transferring to Suiran? Well, supposing you pass our exams of course.”

“What was that?”

I noticed Sarara in the distance.

“My! I seem to have found my friend, so please do excuse me. Oh, and the rumours in Yurinomiya are terribly interesting. Assuming that they *are* true of course.”

“...!”

And so I left her behind and began walking towards Sarara-sama.

I had my folding fan in my bag but I was hardly going to use it on small fry.

Oh, but damn. If she wanted the anthology that badly then I should have brought it with me to give to her. Thanks to my food poisoning I had forgotten all about it.

I stopped and walked back to Maihama-san.

“If you want it that badly, shall I gift it to you? The poem anthology from Kaburagi-sama.”

Her face flushed deep red. Goodness, high blood pressure at *this* age? You should take more care of yourself.

“I don’t need it!”

Maihama-san gave me one last glare before storming off.

Really, these people who can’t accept others’ good will. Hohoho.

CHAPTER 110

Sarara-sama was chatting with Kaburagi-papa. I'll bet it was some crazy hardcore book discussion. Would I be bothering them?

As I hesitated, Chairman Kaburagi noticed me first.

"Good evening, Reika-san. My wife and her friends were looking forward to seeing you, you know?"

"Good evening. Thank you for giving me the chance to see such beautiful cherry blossoms. The beauty of the weeping sakura was incredible."

"It honours us that you enjoyed it."

His smile was as dignified and dreamy as always. How nice. If I had a man like this as my dad I'd show him off everywhere.

"Sarara-sama, gokigen'yoh."

"Gokigen'yoh, Reika-sama."

Sarara-sama also welcomed me with a smile. I was still worried about disturbing them though. She seemed to be having so much fun.

"Am I perhaps interrupting? Please pay me no heed and continue talking."

"Not at all, Reika-san. I was just telling her about how I found a rare book in Germany the other day."

Germany!? Don't tell me it was Kaburagi-papa who suggested Heine to him!?

"...Might it have been a Heine?"

"No? It wasn't. Are you partial to Heine, Reika-san?"

"No," I immediately replied.

I wonder if he wouldn't take responsibility as a father and take his son's love poem anthology back.

"It looks like Takateru-kun isn't attending today."

"Yes. My brother was simply too busy at work, unfortunately. We are terribly sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Words of how impressive he is at work reached me too. Anyhow, just having you here is enough, Reika-san."

Hauu, what a dazzling smile.

"Chairman Kisshouin and your older brother have been hiding you away like a treasure, so I don't often get a chance you meet you."

"Goodness."

"I hear you really get along with your Otousama. The other day you knitted a lap blanket for your beloved Otousama, right?"

"Well, hohoho."

I never said beloved anything, Tanuki! It looks like you haven't learnt your lesson if you're still going around exaggerating things. You'll learn when I get home, just you wait.

"I heard that when you were little you said you'd marry him when you got older. Ahh, how envious."

Haah!? Not only was he unsatisfied with exaggerating things, this time he was even telling full-blown lies!?

Oniisama might be a different story, but not once had I ever said I wanted to marry Otousama! It's lies and slander!

Was it that? Was Otousama going senile!?

"Reika-san," said Sarara-sama, "You were a fathercon?"

Nooooooooooooooooo!!

"This is some incredible misunderstanding, Sarara-sama. I have no recollection of saying such a thing."

Even after I tried my best to deny it, Kaburagi-papa simply nodded magnanimously.

"Ahh, puberty, of course. I suppose I must apologise. But you should know that your Otousama understands how you feel. Ahh, how nice. I wish I had a daughter that loved me that much."

But you're wrong! I'm offended that you think my ideal husband would be that chubby tanuki!

I mean, if my dad had been somebody like Kaburagi-papa then maybe I would have said that. But unfortunately my father was just a big-bellied tanuki.

“You know, Chairman Kisshouin sometimes complains about how closely you stick to him, but everyone can tell he’s happy about it.”

That lyingg tanukiii!!

I searched the venue for the tanuki. Lying tanuki get to be made into tanuki stew!!

It felt like I would just take more damage by staying there so I excused myself.

I had to do something about this reputation as a fathercon... My pride depended on this.

I spent the next while wandering the venue as I gazed at the cherry blossoms.

There was food all around that seemed delicious enough, but I still didn’t have the appetite.

I had technically eaten the Swiss roll Oniisama gave me as a get-well gift, but... I guess my stomach wasn’t up to full speed.

Drinking so much was going to mean a lot of trips to the bathroom. And I was cold too. Maybe a warm drink would help. They had probably run out of hot chocolate, so I tentatively decided on milk tea. Oh! They had jasmine milk tea.

Finding myself a seat, I was enjoying my milk tea when some guy stopped next to me.

“Good evening, Reika-san.”

“...Good evening.”

Who was this again? Oh crap, I couldn’t remember. He was... about Oniisama’s age? And cool-looking in a Japanese kind of way. Slender, light-skinned, almond-shaped

eyes, hobby is probably traditional Japanese flute? You know the type. He looked *really* good in his kimono.

He seemed kind though... Seriously though, *who was this!?*

“I’m Ichinokura Haruto. I think this is our first time speaking. I hope we’ll get along.”

“My! It is a pleasure to meet you. Kisshouin Reika, at your service.”

What the heck. So this is the first time we’ve met? Thank goodness. I was so worried about how to fake remembering him.

“May I sit down?”

“Why yes, go ahead.”

So Ichinokura-san sat down next to me. He had champagne with him. Definitely over 20 then.

“I’ve actually come here to thank you, Reika-san.”

“Thank me?”

Huh. Didn’t he just say this was our first meeting?

“My niece was in your care, actually. Sawarabi Mao, from Suiran’s primary school section.”

“Aah! Mao-chan!”

Sawarabi Mao-chan was the little girl I met at the Pivoine Summer Party. The one who

rang the bell with the boy. When I went to give her the photos she was so happy, and she called me Reika-oneesama and everything. That girl was just so cute!

“You know, Mao was telling everybody about how the wonderful Reika-oneesama was really good to her, and even told me the story a few times. You encouraged them while they were hesitating to ring the bell, right? Thank you for that. That girl was so happy that she hung up the photo you took in her room and won’t stop showing it off to people.”

“I see. I did very little but if Mao-chan was so happy about it then I am happy too. And truth be told, I was overjoyed to be called Reika-oneesama. Especially by somebody as cute as your niece.”

“Thank you. It was my first time having a niece so I might have spoilt her a bit. Before I knew it I was buying her everything she wanted.”

Ichinokura-san’s smile was extremely gentle whenever he spoke of his niece. Maybe because of all the “*distinctive*” people around me, somebody tranquil like Ichinokura-san was really soothing to be around.

The two of us continued to chat about Mao-chan and life at Suiran. Ichinokura-san went to a famous boys school instead of Suiran so he was interested in hearing my opinions on Mao-chan’s school.

“By the way, Reika-san, have you eaten at all? You haven’t been doing anything except drinking. Should I get you some food?”

Mmmm... I don’t think it would fit.

“No, but thank you kindly.”

“Really? Have you already eaten then?”

“No. I suppose I have not eaten since coming here.”

Ichinokura-san looked at me in shock. Apparently it was past 8 already.

“Did you have dinner before coming here?”

“Well no.”

“Reika-san,” he started seriously, “Reika-san, are you really eating properly? You shouldn’t skip your meals. You look so delicate you’re about to snap.”

“Eh!?”

About to snap? Eh!? Me!? About to snap!?

‘You’re about to snap’ is one of the top ten things a girl wants to be told once in her life! (Source: The Reika Rankings)

You look like you’re about to snap... You look like you’re about to snap... You look like you’re about to snap...

Aahh... Ichinokura-san’s words were echoing endlessly in my head.

“About to snap...? I assure you that I am fine. I most assuredly enjoy all three meals a day, you know?”

“Really? You’re not lying?” he shot a half-suspicious look at me before offering again.

“What if I got you some fruit? Should I bring some?”

“No, I really am fine. I do not eat much...”

“Yeah, I can tell. But you really do need to eat properly, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you for your concern.”

Ichinokura-san gave a troubled smile.

“You’re really dainty, Reika-san, so I can’t help but worry.”

“Eh-!?”

Dainty!!

‘You’re so dainty’ is one of the top *five* things a girl wants to be told once in her life!
(Source: The Reika Rankings)

You’re really dainty, Reika-san... You’re really dainty, Reika-san... You’re really dainty,
Reika-san...

Aaah, I must be dreaming... I’m so glad I came today!

I was so happy that it felt like I’d grow wings and fly! Just “snap” and “dainty” were
enough fuel to send me into the stratosphere!

And also Ichinokura-san had treated me from beginning to end like some fragile and
delicate princess. “Are you cold?” he’d ask. “Are you tired?” he’d ask.

Thinking about it, he might have been the first person to ever treat me this way.

...Guhuhu, I'm so happy.

Oh no, I think I might really fall for him...

Kisshouin Reika, 16 years of age. May have found a new love.



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